

Intermediality and Aesthetic Theory in Shklovsky's and Adorno's Thought

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Abstract: In his article "Intermediality and Aesthetic Theory in Shklovsky's and Adorno's Thought" Oleg Gelikman places the concept of intermediality in the context of the unresolved conflict between philosophical aesthetics and aesthetic theory. The conflict originated in the response of an influential generation of thinkers to the crisis of the neo-Kantian schools and the emergence of modernism in the 1910s. Despite superficial similarities, aesthetic theory is neither a revamped aesthetics of the subject nor a theoretical vindication of modernism. By severing the connection between subject-object epistemology and theory of artworks, the practitioners of aesthetic theory such as Victor Shklovsky and Theodor W. Adorno transformed metaphysical aesthetics into a critical historiography of cultural production. Gelikman argues that, while incomplete, aesthetic theory can nonetheless be effective in analyzing the function of intermediality in the environment dominated by the resurgence of naturalistic and epistemological interpretation of the aesthetic.

Oleg GELIKMAN

Intermediality and Aesthetic Theory in Shklovsky's and Adorno's Thought

"Intermediality" arrived at the scene of cultural production both as a reaction to the appearance of the artworks composed of various media and as a name for a new — "inter-medial," "multi-modal" or even "post-medial" — condition of the general symbolic economy. While the descriptive adequacy, indeed phenomenological necessity, of the concept in specific cases (like those of Thomas Struth's *Video Portraits* or Jean-Luc Godard's *Voyage(s) in Utopia*) is beyond question, the extension of the concept beyond such descriptive uses remains tentative and subject to disagreement. Fortunately, the resistance to "intermediality" happens to be as significant and revealing a phenomenon as the pertinent applications of the concept itself. At the risk of laying undue stress on the obvious, I consider the morphology of the word itself. Although less explicitly than "idea idea," "intermediality" wants to say the same thing twice, for both of its constituent parts, "inter-" and "media," designate "betweenness." Holding up a mirror to each other, "inter-" and "media" communicate a sense of stasis. Thereby, they shift our attention onto the movement within the inter-medial dimension, rather than through it. While the word is new, it presses into service an old, indeed archaic argument for the centrality of the medium to representation: it can be found in Aristotle's *Poetics*, Lessing's *Laocoön*, and the newer Laocoöns that proliferated in the twentieth century beginning with Irving Babbitt's *The New Laocoön: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (1910). Rather than being a stranger, then, "intermediality" is a baby in the media-specificity basket, the latest addition to the long-suffering, yet tenacious Laocoön family. The resistance to the term, I would suggest, has much to do with the recognition of this association, and a suspicion that the "talk of intermediality" will raise the ghosts of the disagreements surrounding medium-specificity and the epistemological stances that radiate from this "bewitched spot" of critical theory. (To name some of these stances: David Bordwell's conceptualization of "style" as a media-specificity placeholder; Noël Carroll's demotion of media-specificity; Friedrich Kittler's technoromanticism; theories of post-medial condition such as Henry Jenkins's "convergence" (for an overview of the debate, see Pethő). Instead of speaking directly to the current promise of intermediality (or the lack of thereof), in what follows I sketch a transition other than the one from the mono-medial to inter-medial production, namely from "aesthetics" to "aesthetic theory." Because, as I alleged above, the term itself comes from the traditional, media-centric epistemology of the aesthetic, the two transitions cannot be divorced, and the critical, non-descriptive, hypothesis-forming value of "intermediality" will depend on how and whether it connects with the practice of "aesthetic theory."

By the time European modernism came of age in 1910s, systematic aesthetics became entrenched as a vigorous publishing industry supplying multi-volume expositions of the categories of aesthetic validity; inevitably, the artworks appeared incidental to the epistemological interests that would lead them through formal arguments like prisoners on a chain gang. When all was said and done, this flowering of aesthetic discourse turned out to be deceptive. Instead of bringing the transcendental account of cognition to systematic closure, Theodore Lipps, Johannes Volkelt, and Hermann Cohen, to name just a few, laid bare the limitations of the neo-Kantian critical project as such and thereby cast in doubt the viability of grounding the aesthetic in theory of knowledge. To put this point in historical terms, the reading of Neo-Kantian aesthetics led those schooled in neo-Kantian epistemology — thinkers as diverse and influential as Heidegger, Adorno, Benjamin, but also Bakhtin, Lukács, and Rosenzweig — to abandon its project of establishing transcendental frameworks of validity. At the same time, this experience directed them to pursue equally foundational projects on post-epistemological premises, be they of ontological, historicist, or meta-ethical stripe. Walter Benjamin's quip regarding Hermann Cohen's concept of experience — "The category of origin [*Ursprung*] is not therefore, as Cohen holds, purely logical, but historical" (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama* 46) — summed the logic of the response of the entire generation that rushed to neo-Kantianism only to reject it. Today, the fact that aesthetic theory — and I set this expression in opposition to aesthetics — emerged in the decade following the arrival of modernism seems logical: the tension between the conceptual apparatus of traditional aesthetics and the artistic output of the time was simply too great. To cite some well-known examples: Shklovsky protested that, although Khlebnikov's poems contained no

representational imagery or references to mental acts, they were art no less than those poems that presumably did. Similarly, Theodor W. Adorno quickly became convinced that atonal compositions were not arbitrary experiments, but represented a historical development of Western musical language beyond the limits that the aesthetics of music designated as natural. The monumental certainties of traditional aesthetics became untenable, even comic: "Whoever wishes to define the conceptual invariants of natural beauty would make himself as ridiculous as Husserl did when he reports that while ambulating he *perceived* the green freshness of the lawn" (*Aesthetic Theory* 70, my emphasis). Here Adorno mocks the idea that aesthetic properties like "freshness" can be perceived at all, thereby undoing the subordination of aesthetic qualities to the cognition of "objects." Green can be seen, but "freshness" can only be felt. Derivation of aesthetics from the rationalist epistemology of the senses could no longer be taken for granted. When subjected to genealogical reconstruction, it was quickly re-identified as an article of faith belonging to the intellectual mythology of the Enlightenment.

In light of the above, it is hardly surprising that, rather than trying to correct philosophical aesthetics, the proponents of aesthetic theory such as Adorno and Shklovsky argued that it failed to supply a coherent account of any art, including the classical art whose characteristics it elevated into invariants via Winkelmann and Hegel. This did not mean, however, that the concerns and concepts of the traditional aesthetics were to be disregarded. Instead, aesthetic theory aimed to work through or, to use Adorno's expression, "re-orientate" the categories of the aesthetic. Aesthetic theory can then be defined as a re-appropriation of classical aesthetics in the service of a different critical practice, its "redemption through second reflection" (*Aesthetic Theory* 343).

Given the tastes of its champions, it is tempting to see aesthetic theory as an extension of modernism into the field of theory. Although it originated in the shock the modernist works delivered to the traditional norms of interpretation, aesthetic theory moved beyond and eventually against the epistemological commitments that conditioned this shock. For instance, by presenting Modernism morphologically (i.e., as a device of alienating representational content or a type of ornamental form), Shklovsky and Adorno treat it as a development within a history of art. Thereby, they contradict Modernism's apocalyptic vision of its mission as breaking the continuum of history and ushering a new age not just for art, but for mankind. Precisely because of the temptation to conflate the spontaneous ideology of modernism with the positions of aesthetic theory, it is important to contrast the two. In the Russian context, Shklovsky, otherwise a sympathetic analyst of modernist works, consistently exposed the modernist claims to rupture with the past as self-serving illusions of autonomy: "Creation, even when driven by the ideal of revolutionary art, is always tradition-based. The violation of the canon is only possible in its presence, and blasphemy presupposes a religion which is not yet dead. There is a 'church' of art in the sense of the community of those who feel it. This church has its canons created by the sedimentation of heresies" (*Gamburgskii Schet* 89) ... "All this talk [i.e., of the end of art] is not that frightening. One had thrown a bomb, but the bomb cannot explode such phenomena as climate — and art continues to exist and metamorphose" (*Gamburgskii Schet* 294; because of the controversy about the English translation of Shklovsky's texts, I am using the original Russian texts with my translation). In Shklovsky's ripostes to the modernist fables of self-creation, we observe a prescient shift from epistemological tropes towards those of cultural ecology. As species of magical thinking, the modernist messianism constituted a "subjective" moment of creative practice. As such, it must be analyzed as the ideological motivation of this practice, not the rule for its interpretation:

[Revolutionary theater of Vsevolod Meyerhold, Sergei Eisenstein's teacher and a theoretician of Proletkult] did not have its audience yet. They thought that revolution was a [Biblical] flood. Everything that existed "before the flood" was false. One must begin from the beginning. As its core, this destructiveness had joy, not reason. They thought it would be good to replace words with some kind of signs and, in any case, to annul what was once called "imagery," i.e. using words figuratively. They thought this was suspect. ... One should not judge people solely on the basis of what they said about themselves. People cannot formulate what they wish to achieve, that which the time wishes to achieve through them, that which must take place. Alongside with the action of time, one finds personal verbal behavior; very often, it is taunting and false, because it wishes to amaze... (*Eizenshtein* 70-71)

In contrast to the modernists themselves, for Shklovsky, modernism did not signify the breakthrough into the world of immediate sensations and unshackled subjectivity. Nor did it signal the end of art rooted in bourgeois conventions. Reflecting upon the experience of modernism in hindsight, Shklovsky

will sum up his view in the following provocative shift of rhetorical register: "Communism is not a different planet, a different solar system, but a different stage of life, a heritage that includes into itself the work of humanity. The old cannot be lost because it exists in us anyway. Precisely in order to alter it, one must re-read it and think it thorough" (*Eizenshtein* 72). Modernism is not an abolition of the old, but a different relation to its persistence. Re-interpreted as the communist stage of art, modernism stands for the moment of re-appropriation of art's mis-conceptualized historical essence, the moment when, for the first time, the widest range of material became available for working-through. In contrast to Clement Greenberg or Herbert Read, neither Shklovsky nor Adorno can be understood as apologists of modernism. This is so not only because on occasion they both proved to be bitter and unforgiving critics of modernist works. There is a more substantial reason for thinking of them as originators of aesthetic theory instead: recovering the historical intelligibility of the aesthetic relations of production, rather than championing the artworks they saw as significant, represented their true ambition.

What are some other distinguishing features of aesthetic theory? Modernism inherited from the traditional aesthetics the notion of the artwork a self-sufficient entity, even a paragon of a transcendent identity: "What has survived from antiquity must be good, just like the Russians who can survive their harsh upbringing" (Kant, *Notes and Fragments*, 64). Aesthetic theory, on the other hand, argues that the artwork is a living hieroglyph of a historical process:

In the course of history, works that were not produced as art or were produced prior to the age of its autonomy are able to become art, and the same is possible in the case of contemporary works that challenge their own status as art. ... Equally, what once was art may cease to be art. The availability of traditional art for its own depravation has retroactive power. Innumerable paintings and sculptures have been transformed in their own essence to mere decoration a result of their own offspring. Anyone who would decide to paint cubistically in 1970 would be providing posters useful for advertising, and the originals, too, are not safe from being sold off cheap. The enigmatic character of artworks is intimately bound up with history. It was history that once changed them into enigmas and continues to do so; conversely, it is history alone, which invested them with authority, that keeps them from the embarrassing question of their *raison d'être*. (*Aesthetic Theory* 286)

The picture of historicity presented here offers a sharp rebuttal to the traditional idea of a masterpiece as an object exempt from human injustice. Artworks are not self-subsisting monads or objectified mental acts of their creators; they are monads that depend upon history in order to maintain their air of self-subsistence. Thus, from the standpoint of aesthetic theory, artworks are not born, but both born and un-born; they arrive, but do not cease not to happen. Although they exist already, cultures treat them as if they do not. In a perverse fulfillment of their wish for permanence, artworks are re-introduced into being through categorization, description, reading, performance, translation, etc. Each one of these acts renders simultaneously the work more permanent and more transient, more datable, and more transportable. Because the artwork depends on social reproduction for its air of autonomy from it, the artwork is alterable all the way through. Even its once-upon-a-time enigmatic essence may eventually be transmuted into a convenient design idiom. In this manner, Adorno tells us, the cubist paintings are performing an elaborate suicide via their imitations in commercial art of the 1970s; the same retroactive decrepitude is afflicting much of the minimalist art today. Because of this faithfulness to the retroactive shock which modernism delivered to the history of art, aesthetic theory projects an image of historical becoming which is *sui generis*. Following Ian Hacking's suggestion, this type of historicity may be called dynamic nominalism. Its prototype is not progressive maturation of the form, transcendental constitution of the world or coming to self-awareness of the subject, but the aftershock the future delivers to its own past through the looping processes Hacking describes as "feedback" and "feedforward."

As critical historiography, aesthetic theory liberates criticism from the apologetic relationship to its object; its primary aim is not to interpret the content of the work or define its historical significance, but to transmit the work as a type of historical becoming which is yet incomplete. Shklovsky's writings both early and late furnish salient examples of critical practice of this type. Despite appearances, his work cannot be comfortably assimilated either to formalism or historicism. In many of his texts from the 1920s (and culminating in the 1928 "In Defense of the Sociological Method"), Shklovsky engages both but only to pit them against one another in a rhetorical stand-off without a winner. The steps of

his argument may be summarized as follows: against causal historicism, Shklovsky deploys the idea of construction. With its help, he shows the apparent "reflection" of historical conditions to be an artifact of compliance with the dominant convention of form. Thus, the appearance of the peasant life in Mau-passant's short stories has more to do with conventions of didactic plot than with the history of the nineteenth-century agriculture.

While attacking the vulgar sociological readings of narrative, Shklovsky simultaneously rejected post-Romantic accounts of aesthetic production drawing a direct connection between the dominant properties of artworks and mental faculties of their producers. Against the cognitive or existential justifications of aesthetic formalism (a strategy of self-validation seized upon by the modernists of all stripes, from Kandinsky to Pollock), he severs the causal connection between form and the epistemological activity of the subject. The work does not represent what or how the subject (figured by the creator of the work) came to know, but sets the stage for the re-emergence of form out of the structured interaction of its materials. Shklovsky insists that "form" as commonly understood is a dominant structural convention. As such, it has little to say about particular works. In poetry, for instance, we associate form with prosody; yet prosody does not belong to the poem but to language as a whole; the form of the poem is constituted in part by its rhythm, i.e. a unique pattern of interaction between prosody and stress (in a syllabic material like Russian, for instance). Because form, now understood as constellation of materials, is function of the historical process of art, it cannot be identified with the acts of cognition or creation; these take place, but the traces they leave in the work escape the legislation of its producer. The idea that meaning inheres in the work is itself the element of semblance that, in order to appear, needs to be triggered by the mechanisms extrinsic to the work. Rather than reproduction of genre conventions or artifact of empathy, Shklovsky's form is a function of the historical variability in the normative, phenomenal and structural materials used in the work. To illustrate his point with an example, one could argue that the influx of *vers libre* into Russian poetry in the 20th century has made prosodic verse appear to lack spontaneity and subjectivity. As a result, the pre-modernist works acquired a veneer of rigidity; even for those who, like Joseph Brodsky, continued to abstain from blank verse, ostentatious violation of the prosodic norm became the new rule. Because of this parallax-like nature of form (it exists both as a permanent structure latent in the work and as a variable function of the work within the context of the genre or tradition; thus, it *appears* both inside and outside of the work), the authors tend to misperceive or be puzzled by the form assumed by their work. With deliberate exaggeration, Shklovsky used to assert that the influential artists always misperceive the effective form of their art because the structures that emerge from their works eclipse the conventions used to create them.

Shklovsky liked to compare the production of art to Brown movement (*Gamburgskii Schet* 88). However, unlike the latter, the movement of art contains morphological regularities and laws of derivation that we can use to formulate falsifiable hypotheses. The process of inquiry is open-ended because the effects of the changes in artistic practice are unpredictable and may modify our view of the past. As in Gaston Bachelard's historical dialectic of scientific concepts, Shklovsky's "method" consists in taking "instruction from construction" (13). In the succession of works, it does not recognize a development of "poetic language," but a variation in linguistic constructions; literary history does not proceed toward mastery of medium or mimesis of "reality," but is propelled onward by conflict between normalized and resistant strata in its materials (linguistic, ideological, generic, etc.). Because determined by the persistence of the antagonism that is neither teleological nor dialectical, the history of art is a "process without a subject," as Althusser would say; or to invoke Bachelard once again, it requires "an ontology of complementarity less sharply dialectical than the metaphysics of the contradictory" (16). In a 1926 letter to Tynianov, Shklovsky called such historical process "non-functional": "The relationship between the artwork and the artistic creation is also non-functional. Art has three freedoms relative to the writer: 1) freedom not to assimilate his personality, 2) freedom to choose [qualities] from his personality, 3) freedom to chose from any other material. We need to study facts [i.e., "literary facts" — Tynianov's expression — normative modifications in the historical series of artworks], not problematic connections [i.e. connections of the causal or expressive type, such as "reflection" or "expression"]. We have to write about "War and Peace," not about Tolstoy. ... Answer me, but don't draw me into history of literature. Let's deal with art. Having become fully aware that all the

quantities art deals with are historical quantities" (*Tretia Fabrika, Eshche Nichego Ne Konchilos' 375*; see the complete text of the letter in *Gamburgskii Schet 302-03*).

Born in the dissatisfaction with aesthetics, aesthetic theory gravitated naturally toward the arts excluded from the Pantheon of Fine Arts. But what are to make of the remark like the following: "By its mere existence, every artwork, as artwork alien to what is alienated, conjures up a *circus*..." (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 81)? Surely there is more at stake here than a defense of the minor genre or sentimental empathy with the discarded. Nor was Adorno alone in attributing theoretical significance to the circus spectacle. As we shall see below, the claims the practitioners of aesthetic theory made on behalf of the circus had consistently showed a lot more ambition than required for upsetting the conventional taste. Shklovsky, Adorno, and Eisenstein all have at one time or another treated the circus as the critical model of the artwork. Why the circus, of all things? Shklovsky's 1919 sketch "The Art of the Circus" is a good place to start answering this question. He begins by recapitulating his theoretical position: "Each art possesses a fundamental premise [*stroï*] — that which transforms its material into something felt as artistic. This principle finds expression in various compositional devices, in rhythm, phonetics, subject matter of the artwork. Device is that which takes non-aesthetic material and, by bestowing form upon it, turns it into a work of art" (*Gamburgskii Schet 106*). While this is an early and rather cursory statement of Shklovsky's view, one can already see that his notion of form was unorthodox from the beginning, for he makes both form and content into consonant aspects of a different dynamic — the interaction between the dominant constructive principle he calls *stroï* and the non-aesthetic material. Shklovsky does not evoke this peculiar view of the artwork in order to rest on his laurels, but to put it to the test. Immediately after, he declares that "The circus presents a strange state of affairs" (106). Why so? First of all, because the circus show does not possess the unity of subject matter or formal consistency traditional aesthetics silently presumes to be conditions of aesthetic experience *tout court*. Shklovsky points out that the program tends to be split into thematically unrelated parts. The circus has no subject matter, does not tell a story; it falls out of representational register altogether. (On this score, Shklovsky would categorize the immensely successful *Cirque du soleil* as drama rather than a circus). And yet its disparate elements — "The snake-man, the strongman lifting weights, the bicyclist doing the loop, the animal trainer depositing his well-greased head into the lion's mouth, the smile of the animal-tamer, the physiognomy of the lion" (107) — somehow do coalesce into a coherent spectacle, even a kind of "heroic theater" (107). Aesthetic qualities cannot be the reason why, since the strongman and the animal tamer do not move about gracefully. More important, the plastic possibilities of human bodies are irrelevant on the arena: "Their movements are not rhythmical — the circus does not need beauty. After all, all this is not even pretty. I write and feel guilty for using such an incomprehensible word as 'beauty.' Thank God, the circus does not need beauty" (107). The aesthetic coherence of the circus, therefore, must reside elsewhere than in the abstract aesthetic properties of its "ingredients." Rather, it is a product of the successful re-actualization of the fundamental dramatic premise (*stroï*) in a given performance.

Shklovsky begins to elucidate this idea by pointing out that we experience acrobats without a safety net as more suspenseful than the ones using it; that trapeze artists operating under the dome are more impressive than the ones at the eye-level; clearly, we do not so much want to see better as to look at the events from an appropriate distance. The weights of the strongman must be authentic; if they are props, his act can no longer be perceived as valid. Shklovsky contends that the element that binds these disparate materials into an artwork-like unity is the fact that they all present a momentary overcoming of an insuperable difficulty: "But in the circus show there is, and it is always there, something shared [by all its acts]: the action of the circus involves overcoming a difficulty" (107). Each act presents us with a tableau of this overcoming all the more impressive for being momentary: because it is transient, this overcoming is human and reachable; because it is an overcoming of an insuperable force, it is awe-inspiring. The appeal of each act resides in the fact that a defeat of gravity or taming of wild nature is shown to be possible here-and-now, rather than in the outcomes of this overcoming (there are none). The dramatic premise of the show distills the heroic moment to the bare essentials; echoing Lucretius, time and again, the circus celebrates the fact that "Death is nothing to us", and that, for some enigmatic reason, we tend to greet this rather counter-intuitive proposition with immediate assent first signaled by rapt attention and then by the outbursts of ap-

plause. The coherence of the circus stems from the circulation of the affect attached to its sublime idea. The performers engender this affect as the immanent form of the show which the audience assumes to be its literal content and the mirror of the possibility of the human shared by the performers and the audience: the animals "understand" the trainer! Every human body can transcend the limitations of its muscular-skeletal structure! etc. The form here is not a quality immanent to the work, but the circuit of identifications and transferences repeatedly set in motion by the material architecture of the disparate acts: no fake weights, no safety net, no exaggerated roaring of the tigers, no theatrical cheerfulness of the trainers, etc. In short, the form is the circuit of the presentation of the work that must be rebuilt out of its artifactual components each time it is performed. Thus, aesthetic theory sidesteps the question of the form's "cognitive" validity in favor of its performative stability; instead of placing form "within" the work or into the subject's inwardness, *stroï* or the work's principle of construction stands for a reproducible pattern of aesthetic relations that collapses the difference between the producer, the performer and the audience; while this pattern is actualizable only from within the work, if effective, it makes the difference between the inside and the outside disappear or at least fade. In the example of the circus, this constructive principle is maximizing the appearance of difficulty in the process of overcoming.

In the final paragraph of "The Art of the Circus," Shklovsky introduces the idea of the family resemblance (*rodstvo*) between circus and "heroic theater." He argues that in the circus one witnesses a return of the difficulty pressed upon the hero of tragedy. His example of such difficulty is Orestes's choice between the love of his mother and the law of the father, natural history and divine command. He murders the mother in the name of the father, thereby fulfilling the god's errand. However, the overcoming of the difficulty does not liberate Orestes; on the contrary, it makes the hero into a target of persecution by the Furies, and even Apollo who ordered the kill is powerless to protect him. The circus, on the other hand, says one can overcome the difficulty and get away with it, at least until the next act. In the circus, tragedy becomes modern.

Why does the pursuit of "aesthetic theory" in the twentieth century pass through the circus? To begin with, the circus is a device of defamiliarizing the structure of the work of art and exposing the narrowness of the aesthetic categories built on subject-object epistemologies. Second, by leveling the distinction between high and low art forms, it challenges the reader to see in the debased spectacle the trace of the integral art form, and thus take a measure of the decrepitude and falsification that affects the ideology of fine art. Because the circus threatens our lives, not our capacity for aesthetic judgment, we cannot perceive it as a valid art; it is much too alive and immediate for that. Aesthetic theory forces into the open the excessive powers of art that the modernists acknowledged in their nostalgic preference for the archaic or primitive form. It is the gambit of aesthetic theory that this "excessive" aliveness is what prevents any works or styles from disappearing to begin with. This is why it recognizes in the circus a prototype of all artworks.

From today's point of view, Shklovsky's treatment of the circus may seem arbitrary and unsatisfying. After all, his brief essay does not mention a single performer. However, I argue that this type of reproach would be misplaced. Shklovsky evoked the circus less as a set of entertainment techniques than as a theoretical object allowing to de-legitimate the epistemological focus of aesthetics and to make a transition to a different critical practice. This elective affinity between the circus acts and aesthetic theory resurfaces in emphatic fashion in Adorno. In the unfinished *Aesthetic Theory*, it became a recurrent motif. For example: "Forms of the so-called lowbrow arts, such as the circus tableaux, in which at the finale all the elephants kneel on their hind legs, while on each trunk stands a gracefully posed, motionless ballerina are intentionless primal images (*intentionlose Urbilder*) of what the philosophy of history deciphers in art; from its disdained forms much can be gleaned about art's disguised secret" (287). Unlike the philosophy of history that places the spontaneous accord of nature and spirit either into the classical Athens or utopian future, the circus delivers it into presence as an inversion and interruption of the grotesque spectacle of domination, as if utopia has always been standing there, in every moment of our historical being. There is something embarrassing about this naïve apotheosis of reconciliation in the midst of historical existence, but only to a culture that has torn apart the possibilities which Adorno's circus tableau brings together: "The split [between low and high art] is the truth. It speaks the negativity of culture that is the sum of two spheres. This opposi-

tion can least of all be reconciled by absorbing the light art into serious one or vice versa. This is what Culture Industry attempts. The eccentricity of the circus, peep show and the brothel to society is as embarrassing to it as that of Schoenberg and Karl Kraus" (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 108). Positioned beyond the opposition between high and low, the circus finds itself in a mixed company indeed, flanked by the brothel and the peepshow on one side, Karl Kraus and Arnold Schoenberg on the other. Here one can see that Adorno's purpose is not to defend high art, but to promote those works whose formal impulses cannot be meaningfully parsed into high and low. Like Kraus's war on the language of journalism (or Schoenberg's assault on the language of music), the circus withdraws from the historical schema within which it exists and thus becomes the image of aesthetic relations liberated from the burden of fixed social identity. But this withdrawal is not complete: the circus also appears within the spectacles of entertainment industry. In fact, Adorno welcomes its vulgar features inasmuch as they offset the faux intellectualism of the socially-consecrated high art: "Traces of something better persist in those features of culture industry by which it resembles a circus — in the stubbornly purposeless expertise of riders, acrobats and clowns, in the "defense and justification of corporeal versus spiritual art" (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 114). The circus is the image of redemption of art from the condition imposed upon it by the process of its integration into post-industrial, media-driven society. Indifferent to the increasingly aggressive incorporation of the aesthetic into processes of social differentiation, the circus remains the preserve of the art's original *raison d'être*. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno returns to this thought and, evoking Franz Wedekind's "corporeal art" once again, re-emphasizes that the circus is simultaneously an instance of low art and a prototype of insubordinate, non-alienated and non-therapeutic art practice: "What Wedekind called "corporeal art" has not only remained beneath spiritualized art, not only remained as its complement; in its intentionlessness, however, it is the primal image (*Vorbild*) of spiritualized art. By its mere existence, every artwork, as artwork alien to what is alienated, conjures up a *circus* and yet is lost as soon as it emulates it. Art becomes an image not directly by becoming an *apparition* but only through the countertendency to it" (*Aesthetic Theory* 81). Fearful of misunderstanding, Adorno goes out of his way to dispel the notion that he is advocating the imitation of the circus as a means of escaping the sociological situation in which art found itself in the twentieth century. In fact, he is making no suggestions whatsoever. Instead, he describing the aporetic and involuntary process of art's becoming resemblance. It becomes mimetic of the experiential contents precisely when it refuses to imitate their conventional forms and imagines that these have been left behind; by submitting its linguistic, plastic or musical materials to "purposeless" formal rigor similar to that of the circus virtuosos, it magically awakens the placeless, a-topic memories of suffering and unfulfilled longing lodged therein; this unforeseen resistance of the materials then acts as a counterpoint to the abstract content intended by the artist. The recurrent interplay of these two layers of materials conjures the architectonic unity of the whole in the midst of the resistant individuality of parts that Shklovsky admired in his analysis of the circus. Adorno introduces a technical term in order to pinpoint the moment when such an unimaginable chiasmus between the autonomous and mimetic drives of the work occurs. He calls it a *tour de force*. Resembling the balancing act of the acrobats, *tour de force* reveals the secret inscribed in the image of circus — the fortunate dependence of art for its mimetic power on the excessive and absurd labors of formalization: "At the highest level of form the detested circus act is reenacted: the defeat of gravity, the manifest absurdity of the circus — why all the effort? — is *in nuce* the aesthetic enigma. This comes to bear on questions of artistic performance. To perform a play or a composition correctly means to formulate it correctly as a problem in such a fashion that the incompatible demands it makes on the performer are recognized. The task of rendering that will do justice to a work is in principle infinite" (*Aesthetic Theory* 185). The same is true of another kind of "doing justice to a work" — the performance, or rather a counter-performance, which goes under the name of criticism.

When I propose to relate "intermediality" to the transition from aesthetics to aesthetic theory, I do not mean to suggest that we are free to go back to the historical context in which the distinction between the two appeared. Nonetheless, there are significant factors that may justify revisiting the project of aesthetic theory, mainly because the cultural assimilation of modernism — the main event that separates us from Adorno and Shklovsky — has occurred by the re-duplication of the regressively epistemological interpretation of aesthetics by the artists themselves. The epistemological construction

of aesthetic experience against which aesthetic theory rebelled remains firmly in place, and underpins the commercial uses of the senses and the production of falsely integrated selves via "interactive experiences" on offer at the museums. The notion of the "audio-visual" as a direct and immediate conduit to knowledge replaces the unstable historicity of cultural objects with exercises in self-gratification. The enjoyment of all art by all is the communist promise once held out by the modernist program; but it was meant to result from the emergence of the art's historical intelligibility, not from the deployment of aesthetics as a shortcut to self-knowledge or comfort in the global world. Suspended between the epistemological aesthetics and critical historiography, intermedial works are being mobilized today both as the sites of recovery of authentic experience and agents of resistance against its pre-structured character. The institutionalization of modernism, the mutation of the museum into the vehicle of the art market and a supplier of meaningful experiences, the ascent of the audio-visual as a guarantor of transparency, the predictable dialectic which dictates that each new media claims more immediacy than the prior one while obfuscating the structure of aesthetic relations — all these developments need to be taken into account before the project of aesthetic theory can be resumed in the fashion that measures up to its ambitious beginnings. Where and how the notion of the intermedial would be able to connect with this project remains an open issue.

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