

TOLERANCIA | TOLERATION | TOLERÂNCIA

Filosofía iberoamericana y aspectos diversos de la tolerancia  
Ibero-American Philosophy and Varied Aspects of Tolerance

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*Tolerancia: Filosofía iberoamericana y aspectos diversos de la tolerancia*  
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The Experience of Evil and the Goodness of Literature:  
an Adornian Critique of Metaphysical Assumptions  
in Post-Metaphysical Thinking



After the so called fall of the Grand Narratives, there has been an increased philosophical interest in literature. In short, literature has been considered to contain a kind of knowledge, or truth, that analytical philosophical thinking lacks. An illustrative and handy example of this position can be found in the essay «Narrating Evil: A Postmetaphysical Theory of Reflective Judgment» by María Pía Lara. Her essay is an attempt to answer the question why «stories seem to offer a better approach to evil than abstract or formal theories»<sup>1</sup>. Behind this question lies the observation that narratives, unlike abstract philosophical systems or theological dogmas, can do justice to the singular experience, for example the experience of the concentration camps of World War Two. In that sense, every narrative harbors a unique experience, every story seems to bring something new this is what Lara calls «the power of storytelling»<sup>2</sup>.

However interesting, her essay gives rise to a few important objections. Firstly it tends to disregard that every narrative also contains generalizing traits: all narrating forces the singular narrated fate into a genre with very tangible conventional limitations and demands. The singular is thus necessarily subordinated to the general, even in the most innocent or original of literary narratives. Secondly, the question is if a narrative free from the in Lara's perspective— unwanted metaphysics might not as well serve evil as good. Is there, for example, anything that prevents the nazi executioners to turn narratives to *their* advantage against their victims? It is, in my opinion, an implicit truth, a blind spot so to speak, in Lara's reasoning, that literary narratives in the end always serves *good*. Her attempt to treat evil in a «post-metaphysical» manner seems thus to rest on another metaphysics: the goodness of storytelling or, in a wider perspective, of literature.

Still I think Lara points to something important and true. I believe she is right when she says, referring to Walter Benjamin, that storytelling has the power to create a moral —and, I would like to add, political space, which is crucial when it comes to remembering and understanding for example the Holocaust<sup>3</sup>. I also agree with her that literary narratives —or rather art in general contains a possibility to do justice to the singular experience. The point is that we, if we want to avoid leaning on prefabricated conceptions of «the power of storytelling», the power of art,

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<sup>1</sup> LARA, María Pía. «Narrating Evil: A Postmetaphysical Theory of Reflective Judgement». In LARA, María Pía (ed). *Rethinking Evil: Contemporary Perspectives*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, p. 239.

<sup>2</sup> *Ib.*, p. 241.

<sup>3</sup> *Ib.*, p. 244.

the power of literature etc., have to be able to answer *how* that can be, in every particular case<sup>4</sup>. If we skip this «how» we are deemed to fall back onto the same old idealist notions of literature as automatically more truthful and moral than other discourses. However post-metaphysical our ambitions, our way of thinking will still rest on a metaphysical foundation<sup>5</sup>.

On this point I think it might be fruitful to turn to Theodor W. Adorno, and his remarks on writing poetry after Auschwitz. To a certain point Adorno's perspective coincides with the recent efforts, for example by Lara, to ascribe a certain knowledge and a unique possibility to understand evil to literature. The difference is that Adorno, at the same time, paradoxically *denies* this possibility. To understand this enigmatically aporetic standpoint we have to take a closer look at his famous, or perhaps *infamous*, comments. Why is it at the same time impossible *and* necessary to write poetry after Auschwitz?

The statement that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric is made in the end of the essay «Cultural Critique and Society» which Adorno wrote in 1955. His point is, in short, that society has become so totalized or reified that it has become virtually impossible for «the mind» (*Geist*)—including both poetry and Adorno's own critique—to emancipate itself from reification<sup>6</sup>. All thought and all poetry inevitably turns as barbaric as society in its entirety has become. There is no position outside of reification—no safety, no innocence, immunity or radicalism.

Seven years later he defends his—by now heavily criticized—statement. He specifies, somewhat enigmatically, that the problem is not only to be found in the external relation between literature and society; the problem is immanent in literature as such. He also points out, however, that there still is a great need for art, since «in hardly no other place can suffering still find a voice, and a consolation that isn't a deceit»<sup>7</sup>.

Another four years later, in the end of the important *Negative Dialectics* (1966), he underlines this aspect and admits, incidentally, that his first statement on poetry

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<sup>4</sup> Or in Lara's own words: «it is important to think more precisely about exactly what makes them [literary narratives] significant in conceptualizing and understanding evil» (Ib., p. 242).

<sup>5</sup> With «metaphysical» I aim at something *unconditioned*; that which—explicitly or implicitly—is supposed to have no premises outside itself.

<sup>6</sup> To give an impression of the self-critical complexity—that inevitably gets lost in every attempted summary—it may be a good idea to listen to Adorno's own words: «The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today». ADORNO, Theodor W. *Prisms*. Transl. Samuel & Shierry Weber. London: Neville Spearman, 1967, p. 34. («Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft» (1951), *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970-1986] vol. 10.1, p. 30.)

<sup>7</sup> ADORNO, Theodor W. «Engagement» (1962), *GS* vol. 11, p. 422.

after Auschwitz might have been false, since «Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured has to scream», as he puts it<sup>8</sup>. He immediately adds, however, that one rightly might ask whether it is at all possible to *live* after Auschwitz. The earlier hyperbole is replaced with a new, yet stronger one; what looked like an aesthetic problem is made into an existential one.

As the Norwegian philosopher Espen Hammer points out, an impediment to actualizing Adorno's standpoint is that the name «Auschwitz» today, directly or indirectly, is sometimes used to legitimize the Israeli violations on Palestinians<sup>9</sup>. Yesterdays sufferings become an excuse for today's violations, and the disadvantages with putting a name on evil become obvious. There is, however, an aspect of Adorno's questioning of art after Auschwitz that isn't specifically connected to the nazi crimes against humanity. A peculiarity with the remarks referred to above is that art, on the one hand is treated as a privileged discourse: only the artwork can give a voice to the suffering. On the other hand it is emphasized that art is as reified and barbaric as everything else. In other words, art is *both autonomous and heteronomous*, according to Adorno. But if this a dilemma, it is also from this very tension art draws its strength, its ability to offer a consolation that isn't a deceit. To uphold this tension, however, and not lose its autonomy, the artwork is forced continuously to turn against itself, its own reification, its own form and even the very concept of art. Hence every artwork is a becoming, perishable throughout, and there is no form except for the one that is established processually in the becoming of the aesthetic experience. This means that there is nothing certain or self-evident about art anymore, «not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist», as it is stated in the very first sentence of *Aesthetic Theory*<sup>10</sup>.

This can be compared with Lara, who tends to treat *narrations* as a kind of historically indifferent, ready-made solution. The form (narration) is silently presupposed to exist before and independently of the formed (the experience of evil); the solution is thus transcendent or prior to the situation. Since it presupposes the formability of the singular experience—or in other words, that the experience can be incorporated into any narration at all—this solution (the narration) will always imply a certain

<sup>8</sup> «After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims' fate. And these feelings do have an objective side after the events that make a mockery of the construction of immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence [...]. Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living» (ADORNO, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. Transl. E. B. Ashton, New York: Continuum, 1994, pp. 361-363. [*Negative Dialektik* (1966), *GS* vol. 6, pp. 354-355]).

<sup>9</sup> Espen HAMMER, «Herfra til Adorno (og tilbake igjen?) — Adornos aktualitet i samtidskunsten» [From Here to Adorno (and back Again?)— The Actuality of Adorno in Contemporary Art] <http://www.kunstkritikk.no/kk/>

<sup>10</sup> ADORNO, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Transl. Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: Athlone Press, 1997, p. 1. (*Ästhetische Theorie*, *GS* vol. 7, p. 9.)

amount of violence. To put it bluntly: every experience can be communicated and shared —as long as it fits in the form of the existing short story, novel, Hollywood-movie, sit com or whatever.

For Adorno it is not so much evilness that is the problem, but rather the *singularity* of the experience as such. In a way it is just as difficult to do justice to an experience of joy as an experience of evil; to a certain point, the difficulty is the same in both cases: how to avoid that the singular experience is subordinated to a general form. Or, with Adorno's Hegelian terminology: how to avoid that *the non-identical is made identical*. As this is a difficult but crucial point, it needs further explication.

In the Preface to his *Logic*, Hegel stipulates «the identity between identity and non-identity» as the basis for all thought<sup>11</sup>. This is a passage Adorno returns to over and over again. In a way, he agrees with Hegel: what actually happens when we are thinking is that an identity is established between the identical and the non-identical, that is between thought and the subject of thought. The problem is, however, that this implies that everything alien to thought or the concept —«the other», the non-identical— is forced into the identity of conceptual thinking, where it disappears, so to speak. No matter if the world is reasonable or not —that is what we *make it*, in our very act of thinking. Adorno's critical conclusion is that conceptual thinking consequentially cannot do justice to reality in its irrationality, multiplicity, singularity, materiality —in its non-identity. We are stuck in our own identity, which will always be a *false* one, since it contains no sensibility of non-identity. This is in principle Adorno's objection to Hegel.

As you can see, this is roughly the problem that Lara points out in the beginning of her essay, and, interestingly enough, it is also —indirectly— the fundamental reason for Adorno's interest in art. For the point is that the kind of thinking every artwork constitutes, contains a possibility to establish an identity which can harbor the non-identical in its non-identity. In other words, Adorno would agree with Lara that the artwork can do justice to the singular experience (of evil, for example) in a way that conceptual thinking cannot. The reason for this is not that artworks are less evil, guilty or reified than anything else in this world, but that the material and mimetic rationality of the artwork is more adaptable, more vulnerable, and thus in a way *more tolerant* than the rationality of conceptual thinking, whose identity is always established by force<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> «Der Identität der Identität und Nichtidentität». (Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Wissenschaft der Logik. Gesammelte Werke* vol. 11, ed. Friedrich Hogemann & Walter Jaeschke, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1978, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Behind this view one might sense the Kantian vision of the aesthetic experience as an autonomous judgment. Even though Adorno, in some regards, is highly critical towards Kant (mainly to his idealist disregard of the object), he could be said to defend this notion and the unique possibilities of the aesthetic experience. For Adorno the aesthetic experience is the only place —or rather, the only *moment*— in the totally reified society where the ethical (and political) space Lara points to subsists. Cf. KANT, Immanuel.



If we follow Adorno, the perspective has thus to be widened —from «the power of narrations», to the power of aesthetic objects —but at the same time limited. For although art could be seen as a more tolerant discourse than philosophy, it cannot but fail in its efforts. Every artwork stretches against a *true identity*, a reconciliation which isn't a deceit, but this identity is never really reached. In this failure to reconcile the identical with the non-identical, we can, however, experience the *possibility* of a true reconciliation, a possibility which reality under the present conditions denies. Thus «[t]he reality of the artworks testifies to the possibility of the possible»<sup>13</sup>. Or with the earlier quotation: to «a consolation that isn't a deceit»<sup>14</sup>.

In this perspective it might look as though Adorno introduced a transcendent moment into the aesthetic experience: the artwork contains an option to raise *above* evil, to present a reconciliation *beyond* this society. In that view, Adorno's aesthetic appears as traditionally romantic, and, to be honest, not that interesting to the post-metaphysical needs of today. There is however another possibility to understand his idea of an aesthetic reconciliation. As I already indicated, that possibility is connected to the very materiality of the artwork. In contrast to conceptual thinking, the artwork *needs* the non-identical, since the necessary identity of the artwork is nothing but the immanent tension between identity and non-identity. Or more specifically: between the *generality* of the rules of storytelling (to have a beginning, a middle and an end; to have some kind of inner consistency), and the *contingency* of all the details recounted (What *kind* of fruit did Eve give Adam? What was the first name of the husband of Madame Bovary?). This points to a possibility of reconciliation on a micrological level, so to speak, in the materiality of the artwork<sup>15</sup>.

Perhaps this could be visualized, finally, through an example. In choosing the film *Funny Games*, by the Austrian director Michael Haneke, we could also widen the perspective a little, and implicitly demonstrate that the matter of discussion does not have to be storytelling in a narrow sense, but could just as well be any aesthetic object. On one level *Funny Games* is an extremely cold narration about sadistic violence, a naked study in extreme evil, reminding of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. In this perspective, Haneke's film belongs to a tradition of relatively uncomplicated storytelling, where the message, to put it bluntly, is more important than the medium. Seen in this way, *Funny Games* could perhaps illustrate Lara's points about «the power of storytelling» and the experience of evil.

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*Kritik der Urteilskraft. Gesammelte Werke* bd 5, red. Der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1908, «Einleitung», chapter III, IV (<http://www.gutenberg2000.de/kant/kuk/kuk.htm>).

<sup>13</sup> ADORNO, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 132. (*Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 200.)

<sup>14</sup> ADORNO, Theodor W. «Engagement», p. 422.

<sup>15</sup> For an exhaustive interpretation of Adorno's aesthetic theory along these lines, see MENKE, Christoph. *Die Souveränität der Kunst: Ästhetische Erfahrung nach Adorno und Derrida*. Frankfurt a.M.: Athenäum, 1988, pp. 156-169.

But there is one more level, or rather one more aspect, of Haneke's film, an aspect that isn't really found in the narration, but rather in the breakdown of the narration. On one occasion in the movie, one of the tormented victims manages to overpower and kill one of the two tormentors. The other tormentor immediately turns furious (so far in the film, he has only showed a creepy combination of extreme politeness and relentless evilness), grasps a remote control, turns it toward the viewer, and literally *rewinds the film*—the film in which he himself is a character, the film I am discussing here—a few seconds, whereupon everything continues as before, but this time the overpowering fails, and the victims are by and by killed in a slow and meaningless sadistic play.

What is so uncanny about *Funny Games* is its total lack of all reconciliation. I can't remember ever seeing a film where a happy ending was so distant. In the erasing of the attempted overpowering something very interesting happens, however: the winding back of the film visualizes the immanent violence of the form itself. Suddenly we become aware of the constraint the narration of every movie implies: that everything in principle is decided from the outset; that every redundant little detail which could possibly break the necessary unity of the work has to be cut off; that everything non-identical has to be sacrificed on the altar of identity. Paradoxically enough, the film thus presents—negatively—a kind of image of the multiplicity of immanent non-realized possibilities, non-identical protuberances, and anomalies which the identity of the work could not harbor, but which nevertheless becomes visible in this rupture. This *second image*—as we could call it—that emerges exactly in the breakdown of the story—the first image—is what Adorno would call the *Erscheinung* (appearance, semblance) of the artwork. This is the emphatic moment of the film, its simultaneous destruction and realization: the film virtually explodes, the process becomes image, and we experience a reconciled identity between the identical and the non-identical aspects of the work<sup>16</sup>. There is nothing transcendent in this *Erscheinung*, nothing metaphysical in a traditional sense, only an immanent reconciliation between the necessity for the movie to hold together as a unity, and the need to do justice to the particular in its particularity. If there ever was a goodness of literature, film or art, it is in this moment one should look for it.

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<sup>16</sup> ADORNO, Theodor W. *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 131-132, 262-266.