Partiality, Obliqueness, Reticence:
Some Thoughts on Life, Death, and
(the Failures of) Representation

Duncan McColl Chesney
Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures
National Taiwan University, Taiwan

Abstract
In the spirit of the stated topic, “Angel of the New,” this article addresses the question of the modern—in art, politics, and social thought—in terms deriving from Benjamin’s, and subsequently Adorno’s, experience of art in its fullest truth claims in the face of catastrophe. The article explores a certain contemporary questioning of the limits of representation and the truth-value of representations, above all art works. Making reference to Agamben and the notion of “bare life” as a key figure of modern bio-politics, it addresses several contemporary issues at the limits of aesthetic, conceptual, and political “representation” (though shying away from a full engagement with contemporary political theory proper and its concerns): death, the sublime, catastrophe. Beginning with modern changes in the understanding of death (and life) and the role of technology, instrumental rational control, and economic reason, in the formation of modern society, it discusses the catastrophic limit cases of Hiroshima and Auschwitz, arguing ultimately that a modernist commitment to art truth, even with respect to the most difficult human events, is necessary still today, despite a seeming movement beyond the modern in the reigning cultural dominant.

Keywords
representation, Adorno, technology, Heidegger, Auschwitz, modernist aesthetics
Art is directed towards truth, it is not in itself immediate truth; to this extent truth is its content. By its relation to truth, art is knowledge; art itself knows truth in that truth emerges through it. As knowledge, however, art is neither discursive nor is its truth the reflection of an object.

—Theodor W. Adorno
Aesthetic Theory

This article aims to shore up a by now residual late modernist aesthetics against a triumphant post-modernist dominant regime, not by turning backward to classical modernist art, but by addressing a number of contemporary issues—political and social as well as aesthetic—particularly around the question of representation, the limits of representation, and the status of art truth. Without agreeing with the wise man who wrote, “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun” (Eccles. 1.9), I want to argue that we have not moved forward so much—in our relation to modernity, to the nation state, to the human, to ideology, and so forth—as some would like to think. In many ways we are still working through the problems of modernity in art, in politics, in philosophy, despite the technological (and theoretical) shimmer which can obfuscate continuities. One great modernist, Walter Benjamin, in his famous image of the “Angelus Novus” in the ninth thesis on the philosophy of history, sets the tone for the study—as for this whole journal issue—in its intriguing allegory of the storm (of progress) pulling the angel (of history) blindly forward as it (that is, we) look back on an ever growing pile of corpses—the catastrophe (257-58). The false note in the air, to these ears, is “Paradise.” I would prefer to shift in what follows to Benjamin’s more sober and secular sometime disciple Theodor W. Adorno in his concepts both of the “new” and, for my purposes, the aesthetic. Have we exhausted the quintessential modern concept of the new? Have technological and other changes brought us beyond modernist aesthetic concerns? I want to start a partial discussion of these and related issues with the question of the limits of representation, beginning simply (!) with that most inevitable of catastrophes for the individual, death.

It is well known that the greatest change in the modern experience of death in the mid-twentieth century was not, say, some great coming to consciousness of Dasein’s being-towards-death in the heyday of Existentialism, but the epochal change in the space of death. Prior to the 1950s almost all Westerners died at home with their families. The great transformation of medical sciences and the institutions of the hospital and the “old folks’ home” has led to a condition now where almost
everyone in the West dies in an impersonal, technological space, in many cases a
government institution (Bryant 469). This is a concrete fact behind the statement
that death has changed in modern times. Now, the experience of death, of course,
does not strictly speaking exist for the individual. Individuals die. They experience
dying, not death. Death isn’t beyond representation; it simply does not exist. (Of no
one can it be logically predicated x is dead, because of course x then isn’t.)¹ But
those around the dying—family, doctors, nurses, others care-workers—can be said
to experience death, *figuratively*, since they are not dying but they are coming to
some terms with mortality and loss. The individual can experience dying—and this
experience can be powerfully and instructively represented, as indicated by the fact
that medical students, at least in my parents’ time, were once obligated to read the
sufferings of Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich; but perhaps only the community can experience
death. I am well aware that the point of Heideggerian thinking about death (in
Division II of *Being and Time* §§50-53) is that we, effectively, have to anticipate
our own death, experience it in this sense, as I am claiming the community does
(though Heidegger claims quite to the contrary that it is a fundamental
differentiation from the “they”), in order to come to terms with human finitude and
thereby open on to the possibility of authentic existence. For Heidegger this is
coming to terms with my “ownmost Being” by coming to terms with that which is
absolutely and undeniably mine and mine alone: my own death. But in the long run
this experience of death is just figural or metaphorical. Neither sympathy nor
imaginative projection can lead to an experience of death. There is no such thing.
Religion, of course, has traditionally served the role of representing or figuring
death and thereby giving it meaning, and Heidegger’s famous discussion of Dasein
and temporality is an example of what a problem death becomes in a secular or
putatively post-metaphysical age. This is a *modern* problem that persists today,
doubtlessly not unrelated to the resurgence of religious belief in the West.

Time too has also become an issue. With the on-going advance in medical
technology, average life spans have increased throughout the world—nutrition,
preventative care, antibiotics and so forth have served the goal of expanding the
length and quality of life. However, the time of dying has also been expanded by
technology: radiation therapies, invasive surgeries, life-support machines. While
these too are certainly beneficial inventions and developments, they have also at
times led to serious questioning, among some, of the age-old question of the
“quality of life.” What kind of life is worth living (and what kind is not)? What,

¹ For more on this, see Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 371.
indeed, is living; what is “a life”? This is particularly true in the litigious culture of the United States where so-called “physician-assisted suicide” is regularly a matter of lawsuits, as of strident moralizing. More problematic, though, than the straightforward case of fully cognizant individuals choosing not to live vastly compromised lives despite technological support mechanisms (and regardless of costs), is a debate that came to a head a few years ago around the case of Terri Schiavo. Artificial mechanisms (primarily a feeding tube) had allowed this unfortunate woman to stay “alive” after a cardiac arrest in 1990 had left her brain-dead—in a “permanent vegetative state,” as the medical term goes.

Her husband petitioned the courts to allow her tube to be removed, arguing that she would not have wanted a “life” like this. However, her parents strongly disagreed—on religious (Catholic) grounds. And they maintained that her behavior, as can be seen in a video released in 2001, indicated that she was aware of the people around her and was thus still in some essential sense herself. However, most of the neurologists who examined her disagreed, saying that her level of brain damage made responsiveness impossible and that her behavior represented reflex or instinctive actions. The court case lasted from 1998 to 2005 and involved 14 legal appeals, as well as personal intervention by President George W. Bush on the side of the parents: maintaining life at all costs. Eventually the appeals process was exhausted and Ms. Schiavo was allowed to pass away in March 2005. Ms. Schiavo was indeed a limit case of “living death” or “bare life”: a living non-life according to neuroscience—a real philosophical-moral challenge to simple working definitions of life and human being in relation to consciousness and will.

It would be morally repugnant to address cases like that of Ms. Schiavo in economic terms—that is, factoring the astronomical cost of keeping alive (barely, biologically alive) certain people no longer capable of enjoying a life of “liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (or however we want to define a human life in some quasi-Aristotelian eudaemonic sense), and this in a country which can be said to have the developed-world’s most economically disastrous health-care system—but

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2 Roger Scruton, in a book on animal rights, states a somewhat extreme critical case against modern medicine, without any reference to its exorbitant costs and questionable priorities in its delivery, in a particularly trenchant passage: “In comparison with the average farm animal, a human being has a terrible end. Kept alive too long by processes like the organ transplant, which nature never intended, we can look forward to years of suffering and alienation, the only reward for which is death—a death which, as a rule, comes too late for anyone else to regret it. Well did the Greeks say that those whom the gods love die young. . . . Increasingly, many human beings end their lives unloved, unwanted and in pain. This, the greatest achievement of modern science, should remind us of the price that is due for our impieties . . .” (Scruton 100-01).
it is imperative that one think of the moral “costs” of such commitments or decisions. Who, for one, benefits from such a case? The parents? The Lord Almighty? Certainly not the husband who personally felt grief at the prolonging of the non-life of his beloved wife. It would beg the question to say that Ms. Schiavo did not benefit since she was not even there, but we can ask: Can medical science answer this question—what is the limit of human life; where does it end? (One can say “Yes,” since that is what the term “permanent vegetative state” effectively does.) Or can the law? (Again, yes, that is what happened by allowing all due process of appeal.) Ultimately one feels that the issue needs to be pondered and judged on the basis of some shared moral vision of what life means that is not reducible to those technical terms, but as neo-Aristotelian theorists of the virtue ethics variety like Alasdair MacIntyre reveal, despite the beauty and desirability of their visions, such a comprehensive tissue of “thick” normative or evaluative concepts is not available, especially in American society with its almost 350 million people of all races, colors, creeds, origins, and moral traditions, and cannot be easily fabricated.³ In any case, in the Schiavo example, the family seemed caught in a natural phase of loss and mourning, but because of heavily moralizing Christian rhetoric in George Bush’s America (and his brother Jeb Bush’s Florida), this became a major political issue.⁴ In this sense Giorgio Agamben and his various followers are certainly correct in talking about a politicization of death, a certain truth of which may have been revealed in Nazi and other death camps, but which has surreptitiously become a part of life in the modern state. We all know that our lives are monitored and in a certain way controlled by the state—through identification cards and other documentation, records, right of free passage, monitoring of behavior, consumption, wire-tapping, and so forth. What is shocking to many is that our deaths too may be controlled for state purposes.

What we see in the Schiavo case certainly does not seem to be the beatitude of de-individualized pure immanence that Deleuze imagined as he himself was facing his own death/suicide. While it is obviously related to the nuda vita around which

³ As John Rawls puts it, “A modern democratic society is characterized not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines. No one of these doctrines is affirmed by citizens generally. Nor should one expect that in the foreseeable future one of them, or some other reasonable doctrine, will ever be affirmed by all, or nearly all, citizens” (Rawls xvi).

⁴ The physician-assisted suicide issue is similar in many ways to the abortion issue and the absolute sanctity of life, which somehow fit so easily among much of the Christian right in America along with the proliferation of preposterous guns, the careless waging of massively destructive and murderous wars abroad, and even capital punishment on the domestic front despite a moral consensus against it in most of the developed world.
Agamben has constructed a very compelling, if problematic, moral-political theory, it is unclear how it can be flipped around and recuperated as some kind of bare human subjectivity, without presuppositions, as the model for a coming community—in the shift from a descriptive scenario of the modern state as a permanent state of crisis and exception and its subject as not bios but zoè in Agamben’s discussion in Homo Sacer, to the idea of a bare human subject without qualities as the presupposition of a utopian political community not marred by conditions of belonging or tacit norms of any kind in The Coming Community. It is certainly an example of the “supra-vivere” (over-living) which Agamben, extending his study of homo sacer, has more recently linked to the profane (Profanazioni), and represents yet another example of biopolitics that, following Foucault, Agamben sees as integral to modernity. In such cases, Agamben focuses on the notion of exception and control, decision and definition/representation, but we might do better to look more closely into the historical values and norms that are in play, and that are absent, in, say, George Bush’s America and today.

**Modernity**

It has long been argued that there is no longer any grand narrative that can make sense of contemporary life—political, social, economic, and so forth. This is another way of saying that a comprehensive ethical-social system of values with both authority and scope that founds the whole gamut of human relations and pursuits does not exist in contemporary societies as it did in, say, Medieval Europe. For Jean-François Lyotard and related thinkers, including the most sympathetic, like Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, this means that, to apply an awkward metaphor, the various people in our lives (in the various roles each of these people adopts in various situations) no longer “speak the same language” (or narrate the same stories in compatible languages). We are in an epistemological post-Babelian age—all fallen into chaos and mutually incomprehensible jargons (and petits récits) as punishment for the hubris (here the Enlightenment) of daring to reach towards the heavens, and therefore become God. “Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech” (Gen. 11.7). For Lyotard, this is the quintessentially post-modern situation. However, it must be stressed that the roots of this analysis, as epistemology stemming from nineteenth-century social science, are in Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. These are

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5 For key criticism of Agamben’s work, see Bernstein; Sanyal; Norris, “Exemplary”; Kalyvas, *Democracy*, “Sovereign.”
developed best in a more systematic vein as a description of modernity in sociological systems theory, above all that associated with the long career and exhaustive work of Niklas Luhmann.

Luhmann’s argument basically is that modernization is characterized by the progressive differentiation of once fused spheres of life (or rather, in his terms, of communication) into autonomous sub-spheres of (human) activity—functional differentiation. So it goes for the modern bureaucratic state, as for the efficient capitalist enterprise. For Luhmann, however, this produces not simply a system of over-lapping complexities that can produce bewilderment, or an over-focus on efficiency that risks losing track of human origins and goals. Functional differentiation in modernity involves a multiplicity of autopoietic, recursive “descriptions” of the world (or, what this amounts to, of fully-functional self-oriented “observations” of so many different worlds. In other words: “there is no common (correct, objective) approach to a preexisting world” (Luhmann, *Observations* 10). At its most extreme we could almost say, there is no “world.” “The history of European rationality can be described as the dissolution of a rationality continuum that had connected the observer in the world with the world” (23). Just as an ontological continuum, the so-called Great Chain of Being, had fallen apart in the Renaissance, “faith in a continuum of reason that links the human with a rationally ordered universe” (Rasch 2) is lost in modernity. Not finding reason in the world, man constructs his own codes and rational systems. What results are “polycontextural, hypercomplex complexity-descriptions without unifying perspective” (Luhmann, *Theories* 89). Luhmann’s writing is stunningly, theoretically complicated, but an example from our own sphere will prove the point. When Roland Barthes claims that realism in literary texts is a matter of code and not reference, or when Michael Riffaterre extends this to a much more sophisticated system of literary meaning, they are confirming in the literary (and literary theoretical) spheres what Luhmann means when he writes, “all distinctions and designations are purely internal recursive operations of a system (that is, operations that form or disturb redundancies)” (*Theories* 135). As with Riffaterre, this does not mean that “the world” does not exist; it merely means that we know it only as a

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6 This can be seen in the logic of management of Frederick Winslow Taylor (*Principles of Scientific Management*, 1911, which Lenin read and is a kind of perverse capitalist version—or extension, some would say—of Descartes’ four rules in the second part of the *Discours de la Méthode*) and of mass production of Henry Ford (and their appropriation by the young Soviet Union): expressions of a modern thinking that breaks down everything into discrete elements to serve maximal efficiency and exploitation—a relation to the world spoofed for all time by Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*, 1936.
presupposition of the system—be it the system literature, or biology, or politics, or what have you.

It should be obvious that Luhmann is at odds with Habermas or the earlier Frankfurt school, as with most schools of sociology and of philosophy, particularly such opponents as Lyotard and Derrida. I need not go into that here. But in fact, Luhmann’s is a “description” of modernity deriving from Weberian thinking just as Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s is when they link the failure of the Enlightenment to the bad rationalization (“modern” instrumental reason, but already observable in Odysseus in Adorno and Horkheimer’s allegorical reading!) that led to Nazi death camps. We do not necessarily have to accept such a thesis (as Luhmann manifestly does not) to see that the more each autonomous sphere in society develops its own methods, techniques, jargon, corpus of reference, and so forth, the less it is possible for inter-communication among different domains (in Luhmann, the issue of autopoietic closure). This (to some) lamentable situation is in fact served by the very institution whose role in the state is fostering knowledge with an eye to citizenship, community, and social harmony—namely, the university. The separating of disciplines—for example, the prising of linguistics from anthropology, of sociology from philosophy, of literature from history—is for one thing an abstract differentiation that derives more from budgetary constraints, curricular logistics, and the like rather than from any necessity of subject matter. In any case, this curricular splitting is hardly the same thing as the New Scientific and Enlightenment battles to separate physics from theology (e.g., Galileo), though it has its roots in that move. In any case, what differentiation and specialization have led to, according to Luhmann and others, is, as far as the university is concerned, a situation where the most advanced knowledge in various sciences and disciplines is simply incommunicable between them. Despite the much-touted ideal of inter-disciplinarity, cell biology cannot “talk” to theoretical physics, much less to macro-economics. There is no linking language, no grand narrative, no view from outside a particular functional system (and its theoretical discourse).

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7 On Luhmann’s theory as masking “free-market rhetoric and the ideology of deregulation,” see Jameson 82–95.
8 Although now in the post-modern or, as Bill Readings writes, “posthistorical” university this separation is something to be defended against fusion either pragmatic (budgetary, bureaucratic down-sizing) or based on some ill-defined notion of inter-disciplinarity which usually means “ill-disciplined-arity”—sloppy thought following trendiness in the marketplace of ideas. See Readings.
9 Philosophy once would have thought itself proper adjudicator, but today one can hardly overestimate the triviality of philosophy from the standpoint of society and of the state, and indeed of the university.
What about politics, the state? Luhmann shows in respective studies that politics, economics, art and entertainment, religion, law, and so forth each exists in amazing autonomy, though they are certainly interrelated at multiple points. Politics today is unthinkable without mass media, which by and large is an organ of entertainment.\(^{10}\) This can lead to the reign of “infotainment” or indeed of “democratainment,” as Mario Perniola writes (Perniola 6). But the “real business” of politics has very little to do with the real business of business, or of science, or of law. Where these spheres do often meet, to use an old-fashioned term—and one external in this context to Luhmann—is in the contemporary dominant economic ideology.

André Gorz, in the *Critique of Economic Reason*, has described in some detail the historical processes by which an economic rationale has come to dominate (and distort) almost every aspect of contemporary life all the while disappearing into a “given,” or “necessary” condition of social existence, thereby escaping serious debate or assessment. This economic rationality and “cognitive instrumental reason” are intertwined (124), in ways that can be linked with the familiar criticism by Adorno and Horkheimer of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This is a wide-ranging and complex territory, and also one quite well explored by now. My point here is simply that, whatever our political commitments and personal utopian visions, it is first and foremost essential to unmask *this* ideology if we want to understand the conditions of (post) modernity and the possibility for and constraints on new thinking of a whole variety of aesthetic, political, and ethical concerns. The truth of the aesthetic is not economic; the truth of morality is not economic; the truth of politics is not economic. Allowing a capitalist-economic grand narrative, and the values which support it, to become the fundamental story, the grounding values, of all of our myriad human activities, all the while affirming some vertiginous post-modern *freedom* from teleology and constraint (grand narrative), is perhaps the gravest danger for thought as for almost every other variety of human activity today.\(^{11}\)

\(^{10}\) See Luhmann, *Reality*.

\(^{11}\) It is especially dangerous in that bastion of outdated ideologies which has held on for so long against capitalist thinking but is currently in the midst of complete capitulation—the research university on the road to becoming Corporate U. I invite everyone to comb the websites of the *rank* reigning ranking systems our universities obsess over these days—*US News and World Report*, *QS World University Rankings*, *ARWU* of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and so forth—and find any substantial criteria of judgment that are not based on sheer “exchange value” (market reputation) or abstract consumerist categories (class choice and size and so forth).
**Heidegger and Technology**

In yet another influential description of modernity, Heidegger suggests that no less than man’s relationship to Being and the very possibility of Truth are at stake in the instrumental rationality he sees dominant within the En-framing [Ge-stell] of the world within the epoch of Technology. Without going too much into his idiosyncratic, mystical vocabulary, I simply want to latch onto the idea of technology as the emblem of modernity, the rationalization, functionalization process which may have its origins at the beginning of Western thinking or the dawn of homo sapiens or whenever, but has taken off in such a way to define the epoch since the Enlightenment. Heidegger insists that technological questions, and the technological answers to which they give rise, are not so much false in themselves (after all, if it works, it works!), but deeply misleading about the world they thereby en-frame. Indeed they are ontologically impoverishing, and they obscure Being. In a way, this is what Luhmann is acknowledging from another perspective and what Adorno argues from his quite anti-Heideggerian stance. An extremely pressing example will clarify. If we can get politicians to agree that “global warming”—that is, the becoming more extreme of weather phenomena in recent decades as a result of man-made problems stemming from the Industrial Revolution and involving, among other things, the release of carbon into the atmosphere—if we can agree that this is a major problem facing all of mankind and the earth’s ecosystem as a whole, there are several ways we can go about dealing with this state of affairs. Many people want to find a technological solution to the problem. We need to invest massive funds in innovation of green technology—this will be good for the economy for one thing!—and this will lead to a happy solution. Send all the carbon to Jupiter or develop carbon-eating bacteria on the sea surface, build hundreds of more “clean” nuclear plants, or colonize another planet. Eco-activists inspired by more Heideggerian thinking counter that no technological solution exists to solve the problem of technology, because technology itself, and its logic, its “description” of the world, *is* the problem. As Adorno writes, “A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself” (*Negative* 320), and domination has produced the problem! We have to radically change our lives in our relationship to each other and to the earth and its resources in order to salvage

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12 Of course in Heidegger this *Gestell* (rack, shelf, frame, en-framing) is caught in a web with other terms/concepts etymologically related to *stellen* (to stand something up, put something up, etc.) like *Darstellung* (presentation, portrayal, depiction, theatrical representation or performance) and *Vorstellung* (mental representation, presentation, performance).
Being. This is not the place to go into a real eco-critical narrative, but as an example it shows how within a certain frame, the necessary blind-spot of a point of view or observation precludes the very asking of certain questions. Heidegger calls these questions more fundamental, essential. Technology cannot answer the essential questions because it cannot even pose them in the first place. And if we are caught up in a technological age such that we forget these other questions, this other way of relating to ourselves, each other, and the world, we lose Being, Truth, and the very possibility of authentic existence. As part of that loss, we also lose a proper sense of death.

Incidentally, Adorno writes against Heidegger’s conception of death and its role in authentic existence, as well as against conceptions of heroic death for a cause the likes of which we still see in Hollywood movies and popular media, that “our current death metaphysics is nothing but society’s impotent solace for the fact that social change has robbed men of what was once said to make death bearable for them, of the feeling of epic unity with a full life” (Negative 369). The emptiness of death marks the emptiness of life. “As subjects live less, death grows more precipitous, more terrifying” (370). This presupposes a great deal of complex argumentation in Adorno about the loss of experience in the epoch of irrational rationality expressed in the capitalist system and its implications in all of our lived relations. The point is related not so much to secularization directly as to the common cause of both secularization and the loss of meaningful experience, namely the regime of instrumental reason and domination of nature—inner and outer—that is modernity. For our present purposes, let’s just say that for a life once full of seasonal, communal experience, of labor, of release, of the generations, and so forth, death was less of an absolute because it was well known (for example, it was near spatially and thus more familiar). Add to this the keen imagination of death, however scary, we see in the great friezes of Gothic cathedrals or in the canticles of Dante’s famous poem, and we understand that once even the horrid was familiar. Once we become distanced from the experience of death within lived familial and communal existence (and rather as distanced, aestheticized spectacle glibly masking a metaphysical void or a merely technological matter—experts, hospital, etc.), as well as from credible descriptions of death and its meaning, then

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13 See also the lectures Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems: “The more people become aware that they have not really lived—the more abrupt and frightening death becomes for them, and the more it appears as a misfortune. It is as if, in death, they experienced their own reification: that they were corpses from the first. . . . The terror of death today is largely the terror of seeing how much the living resemble it” (136).
Beyond Representation: The Sublime

I here want to talk briefly about the representation of death, and indeed representation in general, including its relation to technology. The idea is that we cannot represent death or certain traumatic events linked possibly to death or extreme suffering. On the one hand, this attitude is born of decency, of a respect for the privacy of suffering that is quite at odds with the rubber-neck, prurient, nothing-sacred spirit of the contemporary media. It derives from a sense of shame, for others, for oneself: a shared sense of that which should not be exposed. I am very sympathetic to this attitude, however anachronistic it may be. But more deeply it is often a contemporary version of the discourse of the sublime, as in the original Bilderverbot on the image of God—“Thou shalt not make any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters beneath the earth” (Deut. 5.8)—which Kant himself calls the most sublime passage in the Jewish Law (Kant 135). A taboo, so to speak, is established, a representational boundary, governed with all the force of an angry, jealous God. This leads quickly to mysticism: not prohibition, but impossibility. “God may not be figured” becomes “God cannot be figured”; the deity can only be described negatively as everything it isn’t. This tradition is present in two millennia of mystical thought, and is integrated in the aesthetic tradition of the sublime. Something related but more complex is at work in the Kantian treatment of the sublime in the Critique of Judgment. Almost everyone by now is more or less familiar with the Kantian account of the sublime, the failure of mental representation and thus the revealed inadequacy of the imagination in the face of natural or mathematical magnitude or natural dynamism, a “negation of flawless or harmonious aesthetic synthesis” (Wellmer 163) which seems to be a failure, but which ultimately reveals, despite the horror at the abyss that opens up in representation (Kant 115), “the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive powers over the greatest power of sensibility” (114)—that is, a triumph of supersensible reason over nature, of “the mind’s sublimity above nature” (123). We

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14 Naturally here I need to account for the difference between such historical, authoritative representations and contemporary capitalist-consumerist aestheticized spectacle. This will have something to do with authority and belief as well as theorizations of spectacle, but I do not have space to pursue it here.
cannot sensibly comprehend infinity or Mont Blanc, or even St. Peters, but all the same we can think them, name them, by virtue of a supersensible power, as indeterminate ideas of reason. The sublime, indeed, is merely a matter of mind, and not of nature, and for that reason is ultimately less important for Kant than the beautiful (since it does not eventually reveal a harmony between mind, nature, and moral law), but its curious mixing of pleasure in unpleasure, of terror or incapacity saved by reason and therefore enjoyed, has proven quite appealing to twentieth-century thinkers of the aesthetic. Neither Adorno nor Lyotard, to take two of these, fully accept these Kantian terms. Both agree that the sublime remains crucial to a contemporary thinking of art, and both also agree that the sublime has collapsed with the beautiful, no longer contrary to it in the structure of aesthetic experience. However, they then go in different directions. Lyotard insists on the importance of the crisis of representation we see in the sublime, the incommensurability, at moments, of the imagination and reason, but he does not think this moment can be incorporated into a higher reason. Rather, he thinks that we must dwell on such moments of incommensurability, which he describes in *Le Différend* (1983) linking imagination and reason through language. “The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. . . . What is at stake in literature, philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them” (*Differend* 13). That is, to speak the unspeakable, to represent the unrepresentable, though you cannot. Lyotard is particularly interested in the role of silence in this impossible speaking, as am I. What I call elsewhere “situated silence”—in rhetorical forms like reticence—as an integral part of discourse (for example, aesthetic discourse) allows the work to draw attention to what it is not saying all the while, in a way, saying it (Chesney). Saying its impossibility of articulation. What is clear when we experience powerful artworks like J. M. Coetzee’s novels, Paul Celan’s poems, or Franz Kafka or Samuel Beckett’s works, for example, is how radically different this is from simple silence: not speaking. It is one of the great powers of art that it can make silence so eloquent.

Now, as for Adorno, he is in agreement to an extent with Lyotard at this point. “Not just in the sublime, as Kant thought, but in all beauty the subject becomes conscious of its own nullity and attains beyond it to what is other. Kant’s doctrine of the sublime falls short only in that it established the counterpart to this nullity as a positive infinity and situates it in the intelligible subject . . . .” (Adorno, *Aesthetic* 266). What is wrong is that no higher positivity can be maintained in the modern world, not in the subject, reason, or God. Rather, radical negativity, both in the
world and in the subject, is the truth the sublime artwork must speak.\textsuperscript{15} We can see this in a work like \textit{Endgame}, for example—through its own complexities as self-critical reflection on the medium drama, the play obliquely enacts the nullity of the subject and traditional values in the midst or the wake of the catastrophe. In Adorno this sort of criticism is often couched in quasi-messianic terms: the artwork absorbs the negativity of the world and withstands the superior power of meaningless reality in the name of an absolute that does not yet exist (Wellmer 161). This is what Adorno calls art’s task of reconciliation.\textsuperscript{16} It is based on an absent absolute, which is by no means affirmed in the artwork.

For Lyotard, on the contrary, the sublime in art, despite indicating a failure in human reason and conceptualization, is positive and involves a certain affirmation. Unrepresentability for him involves the absolute. His examples include the universe, humanity, the instant, space, and the good. We might add death. These cannot be represented, for to be represented, they have to be presented, which means relativized, contextualized within the conditions of presentation. “So one cannot present the absolute. But one can present that there is some absolute” (\textit{Inhuman} 126). Lyotard is particularly interested in avant-garde abstract painting (for example, Barnett Newman’s tremendous “zip” canvases) and the pleasurable pain involved in the sublime partial presentation of the absolute. “The inexpressible does not reside in an over-there, in another world or another time, but in this: that something happens” (93). “What is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within the threatening void, that something will take ‘place’ and will announce that everything is not over. That place is mere ‘here’, the most minimal occurrence” (84). Again we draw back from the void, of the incapacity of reason, of the emptiness of life, into an affirmation of the absolute: here, being, the hope of moving on whatever the instability and uncertainty of our existence.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} For Adorno (as for Beckett) modernism in art is the search for ever new ways to keep up with the worsening world by negating the previous ways (and ultimately negating tradition itself) on the push to silence and darkness (Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic} 21, 39-40).

\textsuperscript{16} Elsewhere Adorno writes, “If speculation on the state of reconciliation were permitted, neither the undistinguished unity of subject and object nor their antithetical hostility would be conceivable in it; rather, the communication of what was distinguished. . . . In its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship of subject and object would lie in the realization of peace among men as well as between men and their Other. Peace is the state of distinctness without domination, with the distinct participating in each other” (“Subject and Object” 140).

\textsuperscript{17} The contemporary discourse of the sublime remains tricky, in any case. Unrepresentability always risks becoming a mystical sublime, inviting initiates and deflecting reason; or incomprehensibility becomes an invitation to passive submission to affect as in much of the post-modern sublime (e.g., in the work of Anish Kapoor).
The Unrepresentable: Hiroshima

I would like to switch to a case of contested aesthetic representation, of the claim that we cannot represent x, that art cannot give us a truth about certain experiences. I was recently shown a short film by Japanese film director Yoshishige Yoshida, which is quite interesting for the questions of representation and technology. This short film was part of a collaborative project called Lumière and Company in which 41 international directors in 1995 were invited to make short films using the original Cinématographe camera invented by the Lumière brothers—on the 100th anniversary of the cinema. Yoshida chose to use the Cinématographe in order to fail to represent Hiroshima (through the iconic but inert Genbaku Dome contrasted with a bewildered Yoshida and his camera-man staring at it, in a reverse shot, along with the quaint cinématographe). He seems to suggest that the camera (that is, cinema—art) simply cannot represent this. An awful sublime event, it falls completely outside of the very capacity of representation. I am not unsympathetic to this sort of claim. I am particularly interested in the idea that the failure—if it is one—is not a matter of technology. For example, that we await a perfection of 3-D digital super Dolby-surround IMAX cinema to be able to do justice to what the Lumières could not do—or, to put it differently, that they should have asked James Cameron or Peter Jackson to film Hiroshima, not Yoshida with this pitiful museum-piece camera. This is a serious misunderstanding prevalent in Hollywood these days—the relationship between technological reproduction and reality, the idea being that we can get closer to reality, virtual reality, the feeling of reality, through technology, sensory overload, affect. A movie like Avatar makes patently obvious, in its production, that “realism” as über-technological spectacle is now nothing but an ideology masking the loss of the real, and of nature.18 André

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18 Hardly a single thing about the film is natural or real, though its ideology of preservation wants us warmly to think fuzzy nativist thoughts of no relevance to the contemporary world whatsoever. The cinema of affect as opiate—an anti-corporate, anti-imperial film that is one of the purest corporate imperial films to date in the history of cinema! Produced by 20th Century Fox (itself an avatar of one of the original Hollywood big 5 studios, Fox), and private equity partner Dune Entertainment, around $310 million to produce and $150 million more to market (Barnes); the highest grossing film ever in the USA and worldwide, the first to gross over $2 billion (Box Office Mojo); 60% of the action computer generated elements from a variety of teams led by Weta Digital in Wellington, New Zealand (Peter Jackson’s digital visual effects company of Lord of the Rings fame), as well as George Lucas’ Industrial Light and Magic. Microsoft developed a new data cloud system for the film production. “To render Avatar, Weta invented a new system called Mari, and used a 10,000 sq ft (930 m²) server farm making use of 4,000 Hewlett-Packard servers with 35,000 processor cores running Ubuntu Linux and the Grid Engine
Bazin saw things quite differently, seeing realism as a matter of moral purpose on the one hand and, on the other, technique, which is not to be confused with technology, though it has a certain relationship to technological opportunity—for example, the advances in lighting (high-intensity arc lamps with magnesium fluoride coating) and film stock (Eastman Super XX) that allowed for Orson Welles and Greg Toland’s historic exploration of depth of field in 1939 would not have been possible earlier (Cook 409). Commenting on Rossellini and the Italian Neo-Realists, Bazin saw the long take, the travelling shot, Welles’ and Renoir’s depth of field, the epic pan, and so forth as essential to realism in a view that informs the tradition of the Nouvelle Vague and the whole Cahiers du cinéma critical tradition and beyond, all the way down to Deleuze and the concept of the time-image. The purpose of technology, guided by technique, is “to discover, to encounter, to confront, and to reveal” (Andrew xviii), not to agitate, to titillate, or otherwise to affect. This misunderstanding is not involved in the Yoshida example. Rather, Yoshida—who admittedly only had 52 seconds—gives up too easily in his artistic-moral task. I have a little more faith in art, in film.

After all, in 1959 Alain Resnais already made a film about this: Hiroshima mon amour. This film is not about Hirshoma. In the very first spoken lines of the film (written by Marguerite Duras), the Japanese man says to the French woman, “Tu n’as rien vu à Hiroshima. Rien” (“You saw nothing in Hiroshima, nothing”) (Duras 548). The film is precisely about the incapability of the female character, elle—and by extension us, the French or otherwise foreign spectators—to see, to understand, to appropriate the experience, to know the catastrophe of Hiroshima. Resnais, however, does not writhe in this situation of impotence. On the contrary, his camera tells an oblique truth about this experience in the distortion of bodies and the awkwardness of conversation not of victims or survivors, but of momentary lovers in Hiroshima in 1958. It turns out that the woman’s own private story of lost love and political contamination in Bourgogne are also intriguing but ultimately unknowable by another, although the Japanese man is obsessed with becoming this other man for the space of a love affair, that is, he wants to project himself into her story in order to understand both her passion and her pain. Resnais does not
presume to equate the experience of war-time youthful love and loss in Nevers with the dropping of “Little Boy” by the Enola Gay on Hiroshima on Monday, August 6, 1945 killing then and over the next several months 166,000 people (including, we are given to understand, the family of the Japanese man—he himself was away fighting Americans). Rather, he wants to suggest that there is an inherent limitation in understanding the other that derives from limitations in representation. But at the same time he shows us how representation can succeed. As anyone who has seen this stunning film knows, through the interweaving of archival footage and the conversation of the lovers, the striking montage of images of the personal and the general, the domestic and the world-historical, we do come to something like an understanding. The protagonists in the film, who are never named, come in the end to refer to each other as their cities. For her, he is Hiroshima: “Hiroshima, c’est ton nom”; for him, she is Nevers: “Ton nom à toi est Nevers. Ne-vers-en-Fran-ce” (Duras 622). Which is to say that contact with lived experience, suffering, and pain constitutes the event for the outsider, “the witness of the witness.” No, she does not understand Hiroshima; even less do we. But all the same something essential has been represented in the obscure groping towards the other, mixing caution, desire, anger, pain, memory, selfishness, hopelessness, and love. This is a truth of Hiroshima.

Auschwitz

Without going further into this, I want to shift away from Resnais, to a different though related representational issue of keen theoretical interest in the West today, particularly in the wake of Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 film Shoah (nine hours of interviews and contemporary visits to relevant sites), then Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993), and Roberto Benigni’s La vita è bella (1997). As viewers of Shoah know, Lanzmann does not believe in the power of the image to tell the truth of the Holocaust, so he does not use the camera to do so. He rather films interviews, records words, accords audio-visual testimony the only truth-value of witnessing. Naturally Hollywood is not interested in this sort of thinking, discretion, and moral decency, but all the same, as Jean-Luc Godard insists in his Histoire(s) du Cinéma, Lanzmann’s choice ultimately is a statement of the failure of cinema, and while Godard agrees that historically cinema did fail us in this event (in an Adornian failure that is equally a complicity), he does not accept that cinema—that is, the montage of images (and sounds)—cannot tell this truth.
Georges Didi-Huberman has written movingly in *Images malgré tout* (2003) of the four images we actually have documenting Auschwitz during its operation from the standpoint of the victims. (Nazi archives, despite attempts to destroy all evidence, have provided some 40,000 photos related to the Final Solution.) These images were taken clandestinely by a team comprised of several members of the Sonderkommando group at Auschwitz-Birkenau in August of 1944. The Sonderkommando units (begun in 1942) consisted of inmates, Jews, chosen, in a particularly gruesome example of Nazi barbarity, to organize and manage the extermination of their own peers. These “chosen”\(^{19}\) had the duty to herd their peers into gas chambers, then to take the corpses out of these chambers into a courtyard where they were stripped (until the pre-gas stripping solution was stumbled upon) and searched a last time for valuables—for instance, gold teeth that could further support the war effort. Then the Sonderkommandos had to take these bodies and place them in the incinerators, and finally to sweep out the dust, break up carbonated bones, and of course deal with all the grease and fat. Under threat of immediate incineration themselves, these special units were forbidden to discuss any of this with the inmates, to give away any details, or to show any emotion or concern that would give away the game. They were also cloistered from the others to serve this purpose.

As the Nazis approached their endgame in 1944, the Final Solution became intensified, and the summer of 1944 was particularly heinous. 435,000 Hungarian Jews, for example, were murdered that summer, including 24,000 at Auschwitz in a single day. In the face of this atrocity, and their impossible situation of complicity with it, Sonderkommandos often contrived to contact others or simply to commit suicide, but others stuck with the grim task as perhaps a ticket to survival and eventual escape. In any case, in August of 1944 several of these special workers, through a network of resistance and truth both inside and outside the camp, managed to get a smuggled camera with a scant amount of film to try to document the horror the Nazis were at such pains to conceal from the outside world. They managed to create some problem on the roof of Crematorium 5 that necessitated a repair team, and this group engaged in the dangerous act of photographically documenting the truth. A certain David Szmulewski stood watch up on the roof and signaled to an anonymous Greek Jew known only as Alex, who himself was able to take four photographs. In order to take the first, Alex actually had to go back into the gas chamber himself, which had just then been emptied of the latest batch of his murdered peers. A second photo frames this with better compositional aesthetic

\(^{19}\) Here I am following the narrative of Didi-Huberman in *Images malgré tout*, 13-14.
sense, one might say. Evidently the coast was clear momentarily for a better shot, but he needed to get out closer to the courtyard incineration to get an even better one. The third shot shows that he must have attempted this surreptitiously, possibly under the gaze of an SS officer, while walking around the right side of the Crematorium. The fourth shot confirms the sense that he is shooting without looking through the lens because it is almost completely obscure.²⁰

The camera and the film were then returned to Szmulewski, and eventually the film found its way out of Auschwitz smuggled in a tube of toothpaste by Helena Dąbrowa, a member of the SS cafeteria. A few months later as it became clear to the Nazis that the game was up, much of Auschwitz was destroyed, including Crematorium 5, which was completely erased. Auschwitz was liberated by Allied troops on January 27, 1945. Around 1.1 million people died in Auschwitz-Birkenau from 1942-1944 (and 90% of them were Jews).

Didi-Huberman’s intention in recounting this story, and mine in repeating it, is directly to address a common notion in the historiography and theorizing of the Holocaust of the un-representability (Lanzmann), the un-speakable-ness (in the notion of the very impossibility of bearing witness to the event, as argued by Shoshana Felman and others) of the catastrophe. First, by way of caution, Didi-Huberman quotes from Agamben’s seminal Quel che resta di Auschwitz.

But why un-sayable? Why confer on extermination the prestige of the mystical? . . . To say that Auschwitz is “unsayable” or “incomprehensible” is equivalent to euphemein, to adoring in silence, as one does with a god. . . . That is why those who assert the unsayability of Auschwitz today should be more cautious in their statements. If they mean to say that Auschwitz was a unique event in the face of which the witness must in some way submit his every word to the test of an impossibility of speaking, they are right. But if, joining uniqueness to unsayability, they transform Auschwitz into a reality absolutely separate from language . . . , then they unconsciously repeat the Nazis’ gesture; they are in secret solidarity with the arcanum imperii [state secrets]. (qtd. in Didi-Huberman, Images in Spite of All 190n39)²¹

²⁰ These images are available for viewing on the website of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum <http://en.auschwitz.org.pl/m/index.php?Itemid=3&option=com_ponygallery>.
So, we have to speak the disaster, we have to try to represent it—to ourselves and others, in order both to respect the victims and to learn from the experience, even while we are aware of the limits of its representation. Within this obligation falls the image as necessary representation. What Didi-Huberman adds of interest is precisely that the limits of witness and documentation can be just as informative and important as the representation. He notes that in popular sources and documentation (for instance, wikipedia, but also more serious historical sources—even the website of the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum), these four images from Auschwitz are misrepresented. For one thing they are given as three images. The last is neglected. Then, they are reframed, blown up, or corrected to give more “photographic truth.” But Didi-Huberman argues that, in fact, this partially gives lie to the very heroism of Alex and of Szmulewski and the whole network of those who risked their lives for these photos, as well as those who died gruesomely in other failed attempts at documentation. Well-framed, blown-up images of Auschwitz are not the truth of these photos. The danger and difficulty of the realization is equally part of their truth. For this reason the framing—the fact that Alex was actually in the gas chamber—is vital to understanding their witnessing. Likewise the fourth photo, like an abstract painting of the horror, of nature becoming a black blotch at the heart of the darkness, is a crucial part of the accomplishment.

Didi-Huberman writes: “These four bits of film torn from Hell [Quatres bouts de pellicule arrachés à l’Enfer],” the “four photos from August 1944[,] do not tell the truth of course (you would have to be pretty naïve to expect that from anything—things, words, or images): miniscule excerpts from such a complex reality, brief moments in a continuum which lasted five years, no less. But they are for us—for our view today—the truth, that is, its vestige, its poor shred, that which remains from Auschwitz” (Images malgré tout 54; my translation). 22 “The image here,” he concludes, “is the eye of history,” just as testimony is its mouth, its audio-visual representation. Didi-Huberman is more interested, as an art historian, in the image, but not because he thinks it can be more easily or straightforwardly read, interpreted, communicated. “Tout acte d’image s’arrache à l’impossible description d’un reel” (156); “Every act of image-ing is torn from the impossible description of a real” (my poor translation!). But we have an obligation to engage with the image,

22 “Les quatre photographies d’août 1944 ne disent pas « toute la vérité », bien sûr (il faut être bien naïf pour attendre cela de quoi que ce soit, choses, mots ou images): minuscules prélèvements dans un réalité si complexe, brêfs instants dans un continuum qui a duré cinq années, pas moins. Mais elle [sic] sont pour nous—pour notre regard aujourd’hui—la vérité même, à savoir son vestige, son pauvre lambeau: ce qui reste, visuellement, d’Auschwitz.”
and from it, with the beyond to which it points in its partial representation: the real, history, the catastrophe.

Jacques Rancière has commented recently on the debate that developed in France around Didi-Huberman’s contribution (which first appeared as commentary in the book of an exposition Mémoires des camps in Paris in 2000) in Le spectateur émancipé. The exhibition and Didi-Huberman’s commentary were criticized widely in France both for showing images and truths which we simply cannot handle (intolerable images) and for lying, for totally and shamelessly misrepresenting the magnitude of the disaster and almost trivializing it by representing it (obscene spectacle). Rancière’s point is to show how there is at play here a fallacious sense that words of witness can tell a truth, because partial, while documentary photos lie because in their objectivity they assert a greater truth. This is a false understanding of images, as Didi-Huberman himself makes quite clear. Rancière writes: “The image is not the double of a thing. It is a complex game of relation between the visible and the invisible, the visible and speech, the said and the non-said” (103; my translation). Again, this does not mean that all is false, that the photograph has no special ontological relation to the pro-filmic real, as Bazin and others have argued. But that this relation too is marked by its forms of specificity, its conditions of realization, what is left out, and so on. The anonymous Alex, who died in the camp before the liberation, has left a personal imprint on the image, on his witness, just as Primo Levi and others have, though it is not so developed. It is nonetheless essential to his truth for us. And, as Didi-Huberman claims, truth, for us, it is.

In the face of the horror, the fear, the sheer determination of the Sonderkommando members involved in capturing these images, at obvious risk of a terrible death in order to document the ghastly fact of extermination, it seems trivial to say that photographs cannot represent truth. For clearly, here, the photographs do. Not simplistically. The very fact of the distortion is also an essential part of their truth. But all the same, the un-representable is here represented. It seems to me therefore essential to stress not that “x cannot be represented,” or that “representation is by definition false,” or any such metaphysical or skeptical claim. Rather it seems quite clear that truth, death, catastrophe can be represented, partially. My claim is that “x can be represented, partially” is a radically different claim from “x cannot be represented.” As is true for conceptuality itself (this is the subject of Adorno’s Negative Dialectics), representation is always problematic, but this by no means need lead to radical skepticism, nor to post-modern epistemological pragmatism. It can just as well, better even, lead to a more
reasonable critical understanding, a more reasonable critical definition of representation and of truth.

**Conclusion**

I am not currently a political activist, nor an anti-capitalist guerilla, and certainly am not in a position of social and political power—and I image any readers of this article are similar to me in this respect. We are scholars and teachers or students of literature (and film). For a certain political discourse, this is pretty trivial. If great literature is useless in the major crises, or say valueless according to a certain economic or political understanding, how much more worthless is academic criticism about it—especially criticism which is not economic theory or political theory, and so on but borrowings from those disciplines, perhaps misunderstood, and applied to poems, plays, novels, and films. And yet, in a heady moment of post-modern relativism, of plurality of discourses, language games, performativity as the name of the game, in the 1980s and 90s it once again looked like what we cultural scholars are doing might not be so useless after all. There is no non-performative truth; there is no “truth” in representation, so our post-modern, post-foundational theoretical arsenal became relevant to the larger world. My claim is that this is the wrong way to go about it. Rather, we need to understand not that representation is impossible, or that presence is always absent to itself, but that representation is possible, though partial, and that that partiality requires commentary, exegesis, the hard work of close reading (which can be right or wrong, or rather more or less partial) and subsequent broader application. What this entails though is a commitment to representation. This leads me to a final point, about art, for I agree with Adorno and many others that art is specifically powerful in engaging us with the crucial, partial truths I have been talking about: death, pain, suffering, the catastrophe. Of course the photos from Auschwitz are not works of art. They tell their partial truth as testimony, as historical documents of the atrocity. But, as Didi-Huberman shows, they do involve the quintessential technique of the cinema, namely montage. They tell a story in the interrelation of multiple images that is bigger than the sum of any of the given images. And they are also involved in the aesthetic, as composed images, although their intention is to pass through the aesthetic to tell an urgent pro-filmic truth. Artworks—films, novels, poems—do not directly point beyond themselves to pro-filmic or extra-artistic truths. Their relation

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23 A negative judgment on the value of literature, however *engagée*, was best expressed by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1964: “En face d’un enfant qui meurt, la *Nausée* ne fait pas le poids.”
to a real is indirect, although it is all the same a key aspect of their accomplishment. Artworks are always caught up in particularity. Indeed for Adorno the very essence of art is to recover sensuous particularity in a world of deadening uniformity, control, and anonymity. Artworks may indicate, in Lyotard’s sense, the absolute, but only by way of the particular, the specifically contextualized. Moreover, they by definition lack urgency. They present art truths as aesthetic semblance. That is what an artwork is. To my mind, Riffaterre puts it best in his conception of double-reading. Every artwork involves at the very least a double hermeneutic process whereby we read a work—a poem, but also a painting or other types of artwork—initially on a semantic level—that is, with respect to the meaning (via reference to codes, not to reality, in Riffaterre’s theory) of discrete parts; and then on a semiotic level, that is, understanding every element in a text or work (thus posited as finite) with respect to every other element of the work, its closed system. This is the aesthetic, the purposeful purposelessness of the Kantian artwork. Enormous complexity, intricate patterning, for no purpose whatsoever external to the text’s own self-given logic.

By engaging the viewer, listener, or reader in such a use-less, non-communicational endeavor caught up in self-reflexivity of its medium and tradition, itself so contrary to the social values of the times, artworks, according to Adorno, invite contemplation on the particular and through this onto the general that normally silences particularity through conceptualization. Works that want directly to engage in politics or other extra-aesthetic activities—from agit prop to advertisement—are on this account bad art, if they are art at all. And successful works—mediated by their formal concerns or their relation to tradition—speak to the world, speak of the world, only obliquely and partially. For this reason, art truth is not the same as scientific or economic or academic truth; artworks cannot make rigorous truth claims; but all the same art truth is a vital aspect of art (and also why, according to Adorno, art needs philosophy or criticism to explore its indirect claims).

What I want to stress by way of conclusion is that Adorno in 1966 makes a number of key points that are crucial to the debate around the increasingly fashionable work of Agamben and others.

In the camps death has a novel horror; since Auschwitz, fearing death means fearing worse than death. What death does to the socially condemned can be anticipated biologically on old people we love; not only their bodies but their egos, all the things that justified their
definition as human, crumble [even] without illness, without violence from the outside. The remnant of confidence in their transcendent duration vanishes during their life on earth, so to speak: what should be the part of them that is not dying? The comfort of faith—that even in such disintegration, or in madness, the core of men continues to exist—sounds foolish and cynical in its indifference to such experiences. *(Negative 371)*

In this we see homologies with Agamben’s discussion of the *Musselmann*, of the Terri Schiavo case I mentioned above, and of course we hear echoes of Adorno’s reading of Beckett’s *Endgame*. Human subjectivity itself has changed in modernity through an irrational rationalization process that reaches an extreme in Nazi death camps but is also dominant in American capitalism as well—as readers of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* know (and as is shown in different but effective terms by André Gorz). But if the subject is no longer the same, and if traditions—religious, cultural, artistic—have radically changed or become untenable in modernity, because of industrialization, urbanization, secularization, colonial migration, mass media expansion, and so forth, then none of the old questions—to say nothing of their answers—can be assumed to have obvious relevance to contemporary life. So what “a life” is and what “a death” can be are questions we must pose anew. In this Adorno is in agreement with many of the thinkers I have mentioned, and is an important voice in the contemporary dialogue about these concerns. However, where he differs from many is in his radical negativity, what others would call his pessimism. Simply stated, our life is damaged—*beschädigt*—and this is bad. And his peculiarity is his insistence that despite this situation, or because of it, the key source of knowledge about our world is (an ever impoverished) art, since the rationality of science—to say nothing of the metaphysics of the market—cannot be relied upon to save us from a situation that they themselves embody. And since this world is dark, a world of genocide, oppression, manipulation, poverty, suffering, its art too is dark, obscure, convoluted, pained. Sure, there is happiness in the world too, and the utopian ideal would be the generalization of such happiness—a world in which no one starves or suffers.

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24 Did this “late” modernist art end with Beckett and Celan? When I read writers as different as Cormac McCarthy, Imre Kertész, and Herta Müller, or watch films by directors as disparate as Bela Tarr and Jia Zhangke, I simply cannot concede that the late modern has been superseded by the post-modern, even from a position of dominance to residuality. At the very least we must understand it in full dialectical relation (and reaction) to the new regime.
— but as Adorno writes indefatigably, to stay true to such a utopian ideal, art must resist the facile representation of such happiness in the midst of our world of suffering. Art is still guilty, according to Adorno, precisely because of the aesthetic moment, the moment of autonomous semblance (and any pleasure derived therefrom). This is why the new notion of the sublime is key to modern art: the pleasurable pain we get when we read a great book or see a great film—for example, the tremendous 4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days (4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile), the “Romanian abortion movie” of 2007, a movie telling the story of an illegal abortion in 1980s Romania under dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. This film tells a truth so hurtful, so harrowing and wrong, yet does so so brilliantly and intentionally that we cannot help but enjoy, if only intellectually-aesthetically, the experience. Here talk of beauty is out of place. But it would be false to describe what pleasure we derive from the experience as originating in spectacle or affect. The genius of Cristian Mungiu is to avoid any prurient spectacle or melodrama all the while hiding nothing, or almost nothing, in his highly structured, controlled film.

Although the film ends in a pact of silence about the traumatic event, an issue which I will leave open for discussion with psychoanalytic and other critics, this quiet film, entirely lacking in digital effects, in overly-clever camera work, in manipulative extra-diegetic music or commentary (that is, in any characteristics of the triumphant contemporary cinema of attractions/affect), in its partial focus on a horrid, dark truth in its most intimate particularity (albeit fictional, contrived, false), is a triumph of art, of artistic truth. Not a virtual reality but a partial reality. And it is a truth statistics, scientific facts, economic values cannot express. The conviction expressed, however poorly, in this article then commits me to a sort of “unfinished project” of modernist art which would only make any sense in a society where modern conditions and problems still obtain. This is, of course, quite uncertain, as David Harvey and others have shown. But as Habermas in his way, Jameson in his, and many others have asserted—to my mind convincingly—we give up on this project, however flawed—and here I am referring to aesthetics and not to politics or

25 As Adorno writes in the beautiful piece “Sur l’eau” in Minima Moralia: “Perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused, instead of storming under a confused compulsion to the conquest of strange stars” (156).

26 What he hides is the dark moment where Otilia “pays” the fee to the abortionist for his services; he does so I think for two reasons: the first is that showing it would almost certainly be prurient and inappropriate, although perhaps I underrate his ability; the second is decency in allowing Otilia the privacy she seeks at the end when she tells Gabita that they will never ever speak of the events of the day again; he also focuses during the sequence on the face of Gabita right next door in the restroom, Gabita for whom Otilia is suffering this and whose turn is next, before she then has to undergo the abortion itself!
social science—at our own great risk, because we thereby lose one of culture’s greatest resources in its self-understanding and critique: art. Not anything goes, it’s all good, affective art, but a commitment to an art itself committed to truth as essential to the aesthetic. Whether we understand this truth with Adorno as dialectical, negative truth; with Heidegger as world-formative truth; or with Benjamin as revelation; we must hold critically to this conception if we hope for a better world beyond that which can be imagined within the contemporary capitalist system, its economic-metaphysical ideology, and the post-modern, performative aesthetic which so handily thrives in this regime.

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About the Author
Duncan McColl Chesney is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University. He received his PhD in Comparative Literature from Yale University (2003) and taught in Turkey for five years. He has published articles on Proust, Faulkner, Coetzee, and Beckett, as well as on various issues in film theory and history. His research and teaching interests include comparative European modernism, twentieth-century American literature, theories of literature, comparative film history and film theory. He is currently finishing a book-length study of Beckett, Adorno, and silence.

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