

# Inscriptions

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## Editorial

**Negative dialectics:** In his critique of Hegel's speculative identity between thought and being Theodor W. Adorno held that any apparent unity between subject (thought) and object (being) can only be achieved by suppressing the difference between objects. Under a system, we understand, whose prerogative it is to demand of objects their assimilation to a principle of equivalence – the exchange value that renders them intelligible to the market – objects can never truly be themselves; or, to put it in Adorno's materialist terms, the inherently nonequivalent feature of a being can only begin to appear in a future in which its exchange value no longer dominates or suppresses its use value. It was for this reason that Adorno held that in our time thought can only access the "non-identical," the specificity of objects, through a critique of false identifications. Such a critique is what Adorno referred to as the critical component of a *negative dialectic*, the endpoint of which was a postulated, transformed future in which constitutive social antagonisms would no longer tear us apart in our particular conceptual identifications.

In an interview in 2018 Wolfgang Schirmacher, founder of the philosophy programme at the European Graduate School, suggested that the pedagogical task of explaining Adorno's negative dialectics has become so much more difficult today, due to our digital photographic technique. Whereas one could, in the era of a teacher could appeal to the double enframing of photographs when explaining negative dialectics to students – first, the photographer imprints the image onto a negative which is, in turn, transformed into a positive through chemical processes in the dark-room – digital photography has eliminated the intermediary, negative stage all-together. How to explain,

then, than for Adorno the process of negation was both more constitutive and held a more significant truth-value than their later, "positive" expressions? While students today increasingly grow up to perceive what is "negative" as pessimistic, cynical, or uncooperative in Adorno's dialectic the negative is a necessary step in the emergence of truth and freedom.

In the present issue of *Inscriptions* Anda Pleniceanu returns us to the roots of Adorno's *negative dialectic* by demonstrating its epistemological and ontological foundations. While much cultural criticism today is primarily concerned with specific "false identifications," the negative dialectic was always supposed to serve as a more profound critique of the very possibility of positively identifying the specificity of objects in our time. Centrally, then, Adorno's dialectic was to work as a radically novel approach to conceptualisation – a meta-critique – in philosophy and the social sciences. Pleniceanu specifies this type of critique further by taking *rivielo* – the Renaissance technique of making a three-dimensional figure stand out from a background – as indicative of how philosophical and literary concepts can be made to stand out from its surroundings. Crucially, *rivielo* stands in a negative relation to the empirical world, in that it "affirms the existence of what is not visible in the material alone." Drawing on the thought of Theodor Adorno and Maurice Blanchot Pleniceanu presents negative *rivielo* as a process of recovering the constitutive absence that attaches to objects in our time.

The very status of a negative dialectics is challenged in Giorgio Agamben's messianic promise of a "humanity to come." While in some senses congruent with Adorno's conceptualisation of the negative dialectic Agamben, drawing in Walter Benjamin, emphasises the

moment of emancipation from our present bondage to the logic of the market. The messianic, Agamben holds, brings Adorno's negative dialectics to a standstill. It is necessary to assume, we learn from Georgios Tsagdis's discussion of Agamben's "forms of life", or *syn-tagma*, published in this issue, that our multifarious forms of life can only be redeemed when our abstractly coded socio-juridical identities are rendered inoperative. What emerges is not only a restoration of "naked life," but, more importantly, a "living life" beyond what Agamben calls the destitution of a "zone of irresponsibility" associated with our present configuration. Thus, in contrast to Adorno, who held that in our present time truth and the specificity of objects can only emerge as a kind of negative identification Tsagdis shows that for Agamben both this constitutive negativity and the absolutely ancient event of becoming human are localised within one and the same structure of *logos*.

**Technology and phenomenology:** Two essays in this open issue discuss technology and thought in ways that differently actualise a phenomenological, or experience-oriented approach. Jean du Toit and Gregory Morgan Swer present Daniel O'Shiel's four categories, or horizons, of virtuality and show how these categories closely correspond to Martin Heidegger's notion of the fourfold. From this conjunction they engender what they call a phenomenological framework of the virtual, a virtual fourfold. Rasleen Kour and Sreekumar Jayadevan distinguish between living *with* and living *as* artifice in recent theories of technologies. In contrast to the *technologicus* – the com-

plete technological being – outlined by Kevin Warwick they present the *aestheticus*, a higher liberated being developed in the thought of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Herbert Marcuse. By crossing of the subject-object divide *Homo Generator*, Wolfgang Schirmacher's formulation of the "being of technology", is quentessentially articulated as integrated artifice. In their essay Kour and Jayadevan weigh the *technologicus* and *aestheticus* with *Homo Generator*, while contemplating further possibilities.

**Creativity and critique:** In an article that interrogates the technique of cultural creativity Alistair Macaulay claims that improvisation should be regarded as a strategy in music that subverts established structures and conceptions – including long-cherished ideas of artistic control and genius – , while rigorously examining its own ethical stance. More generally, improvisation is an open-ended creative practice which seeks to uncover the limits to any particular way of thinking.

In this issue we present three significant attempts at challenging the established boundary separating the traditional academic essay from more creative approaches to criticism: Shelley Campbell provides incisive reflections on the Biblical Ruth and the work of mourning, Yang Yeung considers nostalgia as a pedagogical function in a contested socio-political space, and Gray Kochhar-Lindgren gives us his second instalment the already celebrated *Pintxos*, where small selections of reading and writing serve as short-lived glue between chance events.

*Inscriptions' editorial team*

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