

THE ARTWORK AS A FORCE FIELD: THEODOR W. ADORNO'S AESTHETIC CONFIGURATION OF ANTAGONISMS

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, my purpose is to take into serious consideration Adorno's explicit conception of the artwork as a force field. With this expression he intends to emphasize the inner constitution of the artwork as a movement of antagonistic tensions, a dynamic of elements that are not simply juxtaposed, but dialectically interacting with one another. In a similar configuration, the aesthetic experience of the artwork consists in letting their friction explode to its extreme, achieving a balance which remains nevertheless substantially precarious and inconclusive, ready to be immediately set in motion again. Thanks to the aesthetic trait of the force field, these tensions are brought to unity in a way that it does not suppress the enactment of antagonisms, but keeps their multiplicity alive: Homer's tale of Penelope as an allegory of art.

Keywords: Adorno – force field – antagonisms

Yet artworks distinguish themselves productively from the merely schematic exclusively by the element of the autonomy of their details; every authentic work is the result of centripetal and centrifugal forces.

THEODOR W. ADORNO

This paper intends to investigate the thought of one of the most prominent intellectuals of the twentieth century: Theodor W. Adorno. Mirroring his versatile genius, his production is vast, prolific and multidisciplinary: musicologist and composer,

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philosopher and sociologist, Adorno has given birth to some of the most significant works of the last century. Above all, the Frankfurt philosopher has made his mark in the domain of aesthetic research: indeed, the latter also represents the specific focus of the present study, which elects *Aesthetic Theory* as its pivotal text. Published posthumously in 1970, this unfinished masterpiece entails the most mature version of his aesthetic theory. However, Adorno's paratactic style and the work's challenging structure have significantly thwarted any effortless reception of the work itself.² And yet, among its rich complex of motifs, there is a precise topic which has always drawn scholars' undivided attention: Adorno's theory of the artwork.

Although the latter does not account for the entire scope of his aesthetic reflection, still it constitutes one of its central moments. Any attempt to map Adorno's question of the artwork in all its wholeness is bound to fail, since its ramifications innervate both the aesthetic and extra-aesthetic territory, articulating it through a constellation of strictly interrelated concepts. For this reason, my purpose is to limit the present analysis to a specific determination, which plays nonetheless a key role in Adorno's theory, namely his explicit conception of the artwork as a force field. Hence, the thesis of this paper intends to show that Adorno uses this expression to point to a very precise way of articulating antagonisms, which has direct consequences both on the inner structure of the artwork and on the general framework of Adorno's entire thought. In order to prove it, my argumentation will firstly offer a brief presentation (§1) of the context from which Adorno infers the value of aesthetic experience. After that, it will be taken into explicit account the image of the force field (§2) in all its complexity. Furthermore, in order to grasp the philosophical fruitfulness of that very metaphor, Adorno's reflection will be set in dialogue with the one of a philosopher seemingly distant from him, Arnold Berleant, who invokes the same image in his *The Aesthetic Field*, also published in 1970. Despite the undeniable adoption of different languages, of different paradigms of thought, of different philosophical traditions, the parallel development of still so similar theses allows to formulate a reading of Adorno's aesthetic theory unusual for sure, but extremely stimulating (§3). The last paragraph (§4) will then conclude.

² Particularly slow and problematic was the reception of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* in English-speaking countries, and above all in the United States. Among the many reasons one might adduce, the effective resistance of his language toward being translated should be considered quite relevant. See S. W. Nichol森, "Toward a More Adequate Reception of Adorno's 'Aesthetic Theory': Configurational Form in Adorno's Aesthetic Writings," in *Cultural Critique*, 1991, No. 18 p. 33; M. Jay, *Adorno*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 1984, p. 12.

1. Thought, Society, Aesthetics

The question of the artwork seems to be deeply intertwined with Adorno's piercing diagnosis of what he deems to be today's severe experiential pauperization, that is to say an ongoing historical process because of which «[t]he marrow of experience has been sucked out»³. That the latter has been dying out is according to Adorno index of a more generalized crisis of modern life: for him, the modern world is marked primarily by a deformation in the structure of experience, that he describes indeed with terms such as “withered” or “restricted” experience.⁴ In Adorno's opinion, such an impoverished context is related to the rampant domination of a reason that has become incapable of reflecting critically upon itself, reaching as a result its sedimentation into a purely instrumental rationality. Thereby, thinking and knowing have come to correspond to merely identification and classification operations, whose object must be then shaped to conform to the principle of universal iterability. To this end, any particular quality is expunged: by working under the strict logic of quantification, the means-end rationality tends to eliminate qualities and to transform them into measurable definitions. What remains then is nothing more than effectively quantifiable and, therefore, perfectly manipulable matter.⁵ Hence, if it wants to prevail as a system, this hypertrophied ratio has to absorb everything that differs from it. Except that, as Adorno's harsh criticism points out, by giving course to its identity impulse, that is to say by making everything real conceptually assimilable, thinking resolves itself into an empty tautological mechanism.⁶ In other words, by ferociously colonising its otherness, the thought has actually ended up damaging itself as well. Briefly, in order to eliminate any roughness that might affect its well-oiled gear, the sclerotic form of rationality proceeds with the removal of the qualitative. However, «a thinking in which we do not think qualitatively is already emasculated and at odds with itself»⁷.

Thus, in order to reach its goal, the totalizing system of domination relies on a specific epistemological tool: the synthesis. At a closer look, it is not the synthetic moment in itself that constitutes Adorno's polemical target, but rather the way in which it is applied. Out of «the horror of the diffuse»⁸ and out of the

³ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, translated, edited by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, London/New York, 2002, p. 31.

⁴ R. Foster, *Adorno. The Recovery of Experience*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2007, p. 3.

⁵ J. Daniels, *Figurations of Nature in Kant and Adorno*, doctoral dissertation, Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University, 2021, p. 71.

⁶ Adorno expresses this idea on several occasions, among which for example: T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton, Routledge, London/New York, 2004, pp. 54; 184.

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 43.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

desire to tame it, the identifying thought brings the multiplicity to unity through a violent and coercive implementation of the synthetic process. This means that the latter proceeds by integrating and assimilating the single impulses completely into the immanence of the spiritual unity, without thus recognizing them in their otherness and heterogeneity. However, in its pursuit of universal identity, thinking closes itself in a logical absolutism, which dwells in an ossified abstractness that has lost any vital contact with concretion.

Nonetheless, such mutilation process towards the different does not occur just in the realm of pure thinking. On the contrary, according to Adorno, this coercion to identification finds its homologous counterpart in the social reality too: «[t]he identifying principle of the subject is itself the internalized principle of society»⁹. Thereby, Adorno stresses the pervasiveness of this degenerated form of rationality that penetrates all dimensions of life, thus the social totality as well, which has turned into a fully administered world.¹⁰ Consequently, as a domain not spared from the ratio's all-encompassing lust for domination, even in the administered world the intransigence of the reified spirit towards everything that is not immediately subsumable in it runs rampant, raging against the individual himself. The process of alienation and reification that the latter undergoes deprives him of every instinct that threatens to escape control and serial planning: after that, all that remains are neutralized and replaceable beings, perfectly integrated into conceptual schemes.¹¹ Thereby, the modern fossilization of human spontaneity and freedom helps fuel the fixation of social conventions in an apparently immutable *status quo*.

In short, the prevailing suppression of the qualitative, of the diffuse, of the non-subsumable in favour of a deadly and indistinctive homologation leads to a substantial neglect of what is non-conceptual, material, concrete: namely to a general anaesthetization, that determines the abovementioned experiential impoverishment. For such reason, many scholars have identified Adorno's conception of the aesthetic experience as a privileged laboratory where a certain renewal of the experience *tout court* could be indeed possible.¹² The aesthetic would become the stage for

⁹ Ibid., p. 241.

¹⁰ M. J. Thompson, "Adorno's Reception of Weber and Lukács," in P. E. Gordon, E. Hammer, M. Pinsky (ed. by), *A Companion to Adorno*, Wiley Blackwell, Hoboken, 2020, p. 224.

¹¹ M. Horkheimer, T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 149.

¹² Cf. for example, M. Jay, "Is experience still in crisis? Reflections on a Frankfurt School Lament," in T. Hunh (ed. by), *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p.139. Or, similarly, see Kurt Lenk, who, with clear reference to the aesthetic object as the authentic work of art, attributes to the latter the «capacity to generate experiences not yet regulated by the system of the administered world» in K. Lenk, "Zur methodik der Kunstsoziologie", in P. Bürger (ed. by), *Seminar: Literatur- und Kunstsoziologie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M., 1978, p. 64.

that genuine experience of otherness, which is recognized as such and not traced back to the principle of identity. By rescuing the qualitative from the quantitative; the dissonant from the harmonious; what is different as opposed to that which conforms, Adorno's aesthetic theory grows into a crucial part and parcel of his critical theory. This is why Adorno's aesthetic experience must be understood in close connection with the social whole, which includes, as we have seen, the social organization of life itself and the philosophical paradigms that emerge out of that said life.¹³

Nevertheless, the aesthetic object *par excellence*, where all those threads come to an actually meaningful interweaving, is the artwork. The specific trait that is now under consideration does not concern a particular work of art, but the work of art as such. More precisely, I would like to focus on the very character that for Adorno helps authentic art to fulfil its critical function as the ultimate instance of resistance against the dominant principle of reality. Hence, I am referring here to Adorno's explicit determination of the artwork as a force field, which appears multiple times throughout *Aesthetic Theory* as well as in several other works of his¹⁴.

2. The aesthetic image of the force field

In truth, to be accurate, Adorno's philosophical interest towards the metaphor of the force field (*Kraftfeld*) is not a novelty in the tradition of modern German thought: already Benjamin had discerned its potential and theorized it in a way not so distant from Adorno's one.¹⁵ In spite of this, however, the latter has elaborated a personal and, under many aspects, original version of it. To offer then a general but still effective definition of Adorno's notion of force field, I turn to Martin Jay's

Analogously, Stephen Eric Bronner states that «[t]he question of whether metaphysical experience is still possible, which animates *Negative Dialectic* receives its answer in *Aesthetic Theory* where experience is preserved in the work of art» in S. E. Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, p. 193.

¹³ J. Daniels, *Figurations of Nature in Kant and Adorno*, cit., p. 20.

¹⁴ See, for example, the two essays, *Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)* e *Valery Proust Museum*, in T. W. Adorno, *Prisms*, transl. in Eng. S. Weber Nicholson and S. Weber, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. respectively 166, 184.

¹⁵ That the meaning Benjamin attributes to the force field does not significantly differ from the one that, as we will see, Adorno elaborated can be glimpsed in the following quote: «Every historical state of affairs presented dialectically polarizes and becomes a force field in which the conflict between fore-and after-history plays itself out», in W. Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Practice]" in W. Benjamin, *Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*, ed. Gary Smith, The University Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989, p. 60.

largely agreeable formulation, according to which the force field would suggest «a nontotalized juxtaposition of changing elements, a dynamic interplay of attractions and aversions, without a generative first principle, common denominator, or inherent essence»¹⁶. At a closer look, however, beside that image, Adorno employs another suggestive expression, once again borrowed from Benjamin, namely the constellation.

At first glance, the two concepts seem to share the one and the same meaning, that is to convey a non-identifying configuration of different moments and of the relations that are established among them. And yet, a certain distinction is no less perceivable. On the one hand, the constellation tends to point out the non-coercive modality of an articulation of elements, which does not obey the violence of an all-encompassing identity, but conversely lets otherness and difference shine. For this reason, Adorno often associates it to his speculative proceeding¹⁷, which consists of fragments, that are endowed with their own light, but, when brought together, they illuminate each other, giving rise to further forms and therefore further meanings, like stars gathered in constellations. On the other hand, though, the image of the force field strongly places the emphasis on the tensive and contrasting nature of impulses that defies any harmonious integration. As a matter of fact, as we shall see, Adorno gives an account of the conflictual instances that artworks intrinsically are by summoning up the analogy with the force field. Still, on a more general basis, Adorno does use both metaphors to remark the relational dimension that allows to keep the dynamic among multiple moments alive, preventing thus their deadly and conclusive ossification in an abstract universal. Thereby, the result is not a crude relativism of diffuse factors without a solid complex, but a dialectical model of an unfolding that simultaneously satisfies the request of stringency without deriving it, however, from empty conventions. This is clearly explained by Adorno's conception of aesthetics as concerned with «the dynamic relation of the universal and the particular, which does not impute the universal to the particular externally but seeks it rather in the force fields of the particular itself»¹⁸.

To provide a concrete exemplification of the logic that the artwork as force field expresses, I will closely analyse how Adorno conceives the artwork's inner structure, keeping nonetheless very well in mind his hostility toward the moment

¹⁶ M. Jay, *Force fields: between intellectual history and cultural critique*, Routledge, London/New York, 2013, p. 2.

¹⁷ According to Adorno's intentions, *Aesthetic Theory* itself should have been composed through the constellative modality, where in Adorno's words its argumentative structure «must assemble the whole out of a series of partial complexes that are, so to speak, of equal weight and concentrically arranged all on the same level; their constellation, not their succession, must yield the idea» in R. Tiedemann, G. Adorno, "Editors' afterword", in T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, cit., p. 364.

¹⁸ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, cit., p. 351.

of triumphantly smooth reconciliation that traditionally fulfils a dialectical process. On closer examination, no matter whether it is a piece of music, a poem or a painting, Adorno still identifies within the work several couples of contrasting moments that inform its internal configuration: autonomy and *fait social*, mimesis and rationality, expression and construction, spiritual and sensual, just to mention some examples. More specifically, it is worth noting that all conceptual pairs are unfolded in a way that responds to the necessity of grasping the so-called processual character of the artwork. By that Adorno means the only adequate modality of experiencing the latter, namely as something immanently living and, thus, never static, that pursues «the enactment of antagonisms that each work necessarily has in itself»¹⁹. Accordingly, its inner processuality and liveness negate any analytic approach in the sense of a surgical dismemberment in isolated components: in doing so, the artwork would be inevitably reduced to a dead and meaningless conglomerate²⁰ of interchangeable and qualitatively neutral elements.

To avoid such reified attitude towards the artistic creation, Adorno strongly suggests an aesthetic experience of it, which finds its specificity not only in perceiving the artworks' constitutive conflictuality, but also in letting it explode. Through an aesthetic gaze, they «become force fields of their antagonisms; otherwise, the encapsuled forces would simply run parallel to each other or dissipate»²¹. In that regard, the aesthetic compartment offers a fruitful alternative to the ever-sameness of the administered world as well as to the unproductive immediacy of the diffuse. Therefore, the aesthetic image of the force field captures the relational interplay of attractions and aversions within the work, but it does not try to solve it in favour of either pole. The antagonistic dynamic must be brought to the extreme of its friction, because precisely in the climax of its enactment Adorno believes to rescue an authentic experiential content. As a matter of fact, today's generalized context of blindness has inhibited our capacity to truly experience the unfolding of tensions, by overwhelming us with ready-made solutions that conceal unresolved or violently resolved attritions behind the *façade* of a fake harmony.

This is why for Adorno the key point of the matter does not lie in the resolute polarization towards one of the pair's contrasting moments. In this respect, his approach deviates from the Hegelian one: even before Adorno, Hegel had already recognized the value of the tensive component, but in its propaedeutic function to the final result. Consequently, as Adorno puts it, the smooth harmonic

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 176.

²⁰ A. Eusterschulte, „Zur Theorie des Kunstwerks“, in A. Eusterschulte, S. Tränkle, (edited by), *Theodor. W. Adorno: Ästhetische Theorie*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, 2021, p. 173.

²¹ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, cit., p. 176.

identity that he reaches actually nullifies the instance of tension itself.²² If the artwork is then something living that needs to be experienced in its essential processuality, the annihilation of tension that occurs in the pacified balance provokes the consequent loss of the artwork as well. So much so that Adorno identifies the criterion to determine the aesthetic value of artworks neither in the total absorption of one pole in the other, nor in a stable equalization, but just in «the profundity with which they carry out the tension»²³ among the elements that inform them. Accordingly, the use of the image of the force field becomes decisively pregnant since it figuratively recalls the stage, the arena, where the tensive enactment takes place, rather than its final static result.

Nevertheless, as already mentioned, «the antagonistic content of aesthetic experience»²⁴ does not end up in dissipating the single impulses, either. This means that there has to be some kind of unifying moment that as a centripetal force brings all the artwork's details together, giving them meaning and distinguishing them from a vacuous indifference.²⁵ In that respect, the artwork indeed owns a synthetic moment that, however, does not coincide with any harmonisation or suppression of tensions.²⁶ Conversely, only through the exacerbation of their friction, Adorno affirms that it is then possible to achieve balance: a balance which remains nonetheless substantially precarious and inconclusive, ready to be immediately set in motion again. The specifically aesthetic instance that connotes the artwork as a force field avoids the fatal disintegration of the latter by articulating the longing for unity that emerges right from its own components. The aesthetic synthesis merges such pulsions into a material unity, which is itself only a moment: the abovementioned centripetal force is contrasted by a centrifugal one that equally stems from the same manifold that sought to be unified.²⁷

Therefore, authentic artworks dwell in a constantly fragile balance, without ever being able to secure it once and for all: «Homer's tale of Penelope, who in the evening unraveled what she had accomplished during the day, is a self-unconscious allegory of art»²⁸. Thereby, it comes to expression the processual nature that Adorno attributes to genuine art, namely that enduring dynamic that arises from the aesthetic awareness of the impossibility of a smooth identity of the one and the many. For this reason, the artwork accumulates its inner conflictual forces and lets

²² Ibid., p. 46.

²³ Ibid., p. 99.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 291.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 303.

²⁶ A. Eusterschulte, „Zur Theorie des Kunstwerks“, cit., p. 174.

²⁷ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, cit., p. 186.

²⁸ Ivi.

them enact in their full intensity, grasping the non-conclusiveness of the movement itself, since «the work is at once the quintessence of relations of tension and the attempt to dissolve them»²⁹.

And yet, the tension that vivifies the artworks takes on a decisive critical value since it mirrors the external one. With Adorno's words, «[t]he unresolved antagonisms of reality»³⁰ penetrate through the mediation of the aesthetic form into art. This means that «[t]he tensions are not copied but rather form the work»³¹. Thus, by positing the antagonistic situation as a totality, artworks perform their own gesture of rebellion³², namely they expose the actual irreconcilability of social conflicts, unmasking the illusion perpetrated by the dominant system, which instead assumes them to be happily resolved. However, in order not to betray its utopian character, «[p]aradoxically, art must testify to the unreconciled and at the same time envision its reconciliation»³³. In this respect then, the interplay of centrifugal and centripetal forces, no less than the image of the force field, concurs precisely to render the sense of an aesthetic configuration that allows art to synthesize its moments without suffocating them in dictatorial identity. Once again, it comes down to a unity *sui generis*: one that as soon as it «becomes stable, it is already lost»³⁴.

3. Adorno and Berleant: a dialogue attempt

To conclude this study, I intend to shortly set in dialogue Adorno's account of the force field with Arnold Berleant's ground-breaking book, *The Aesthetic Field*. Of course, it is undeniable that the two philosophers diverge in many aspects: language, philosophical tradition, paradigm of thought. Nevertheless, there do are some unexpected convergences that motivate what I believe to be a speculatively fruitful interaction between the two. Among such proximities, I could mention a mutual background in music, which has deeply influenced their own way of thinking³⁵;

²⁹ Ibid., p. 292.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

³¹ Ibid., p. 324.

³² P. E. Gordon, "Universal and particular," in A. Eusterschulte, S. Tränkle, (ed. by), *Theodor. W. Adorno: Ästhetische Theorie*, cit., p. 194.

³³ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, cit., p. 168.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 187.

³⁵ Beyond the purely biographical fact, such a proximity to music common to the two becomes particularly interesting when it relates to their thoughts. That is, in both cases, music seems to influence their way of philosophising. If Adorno states that, on the basis of Schoenberg's experience with traditional music,

the temporal closeness of their respective works that I am commenting on; finally, a certain attention towards John Dewey's thought³⁶. Anyway, the very core of this suggested parallelism concerns the metaphor of the field, which in both cases directly involves the aesthetic.

Since Adorno's account has been sufficiently analysed, I will now very briefly introduce Berleant's main argumentation on the matter. The guiding concept of his work is of course the idea that art could be best understood as a complex field consisting of a number of interdependent factors, namely as an aesthetic field. In Berleant's opinion, the latter consists of several ubiquitous features such as artist, art object, appreciator, and performer, which are inseparably interconnected in our experience of art, but also influenced by the ambient's biological, social, historical, cultural, technological forces.³⁷ So much so that the reason that motivates his relying on the metaphor of the aesthetic field is a constitutive partiality of every notion of art that isolates and absolutizes any of the abovementioned factors: in order to fully grasp art, one has to make reference «to the total situation in which the objects, activities, and experiences of art occur, a setting which includes all these *denotata* and more»³⁸ that act together in a creative interplay. Due to the ubiquitousness of this experiential invariants, Berleant claims that art is not a separate kind of experience. Accordingly, he rejects the seclusion of art from life and from the full scope of human activities: the aesthetic is rather a specific mode in which experience may occur. Furthermore, such unity of experience implies a replacement of the traditionally passive and contemplative quality of aesthetic perception, in favour of an active attention, an involvement of the participant in the aesthetic field: the so-called aesthetic engagement.³⁹

«instead of reducing philosophy to categories, one would in a sense have to compose it first» (T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, cit., p. 33); Berleant makes explicit on several occasions the actual correspondence between some of his philosophical notions and his musical experience. This occurs, for example, in the elaboration of the concept of the aesthetic field as a field of interdependent factors that precisely reflects the musical context. Cf. A. Berleant, *The music in my philosophy*, in "ASA Newsletter," 2012, 32.3.

³⁶ Berleant's interest in Dewey's philosophy is not at all surprising, given the former's speculative engagement with pragmatism, whereas claiming such an interest on the part of Adorno may appear quite disorienting. And yet, unlike Horkheimer's harsh aversion to Dewey's thought, in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno explicitly names him twice in a tone that is anything but critical. Cf. T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, cit., pp. 335; 353.

³⁷ A. Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field. A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Cybereditions, 2000, pp. 5-6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Although presented in a nutshell, Berleant's approach shows significant differences from Adorno's one, and yet, we are still able to identify some common traits that directly concern the aesthetic itself and the aesthetic meaningfulness of the image of the force field. In fact, what stands out from the two accounts even in their discrepancies is the acknowledgement of a particular adequacy of that metaphor to express some central aspects of the aesthetic: the relational and the performative ones. Hence, both philosophers regard the field as a pregnant configuration where the intrinsic relational instance of the aesthetic clearly emerges. In light of the previous considerations, it is evident that articulating interrelations has become a decisive trait of contemporary theorizations of the aesthetic, especially if this articulation occurs in a way that allows a continuous and reciprocal interaction between elements that are not thereby fixed into solitary atoms. With Berleant's words: «the aesthetic field is not a combination of separate elements but a single whole»⁴⁰.

Moreover, the emphasis that both Adorno and Berleant place on the specific mode that the aesthetic experience appoints amidst the full spectrum of human experience invokes the relevance of a component of the aesthetic that is markedly performative rather than thematic. In other words, the force field enables to bring the attention on the peculiar modality through which the aesthetic operates among many vectors, instead of focusing only on their thematic and substantialist specifications. The risk they imply is to define the aesthetic on grounds of elements that surely belong to it and yet, once hypostatized, deform it. Thereby, it follows that the dynamic tensions that constitute the aesthetic in its operativity become static juxtapositions between mutually exclusive fixed poles.⁴¹ It is precisely in that sense that Berleant affirms that he is «deliberately attempting to see the aesthetic qualitatively rather than substantively»⁴², which means that he privileges an adjectival and adverbial use of the term "aesthetic", making the operative nature of the aesthetic field strikingly stand out. Not so differently, Adorno states that aesthetics is deeply invested in the construction of nexuses, in the way one moment calls up the next,⁴³ which is well visible in his conception of the force field, through which Adorno too enhances that same operative trait of the aesthetic. Therefore, all things considered, it is not without reason that between Adorno and Berleant a certain dialogue can indeed be developed, of which on this occasion I have offered just a simple glimpse. Notwithstanding, it is my firm belief that it does have significant potential, above all regarding a possible reading of Adorno's aesthetic theory that could inaugurate studies on its as yet uninvestigated aspects.

⁴⁰ A. Berleant, "Objects into Persons: The Way to Social Aesthetics," in *Espes*, 6.2 (2017), p. 11.

⁴¹ G. Matteucci, "The aesthetic field: Arnold Berleant's philosophy as a new understanding of experience," in *Popular Inquiry*, 1/2022, p. 119.

⁴² A. Berleant, *The Aesthetic Field*, cit., p. 87.

⁴³ Cf. for example T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, cit., pp. 359; 290.

4. The sign of the aesthetic in contemporary thought

As has been shown, this paper has placed its undivided attention on the metaphor of the force field. In particular, it was my intention to enhance the relevance of what Ayon Maharaj has called Adorno's «key move»⁴⁴, namely his conception of the artwork as an active field of forces, an image that best expresses the artwork's tensive and processual nature. In this regard, one should not underestimate Adorno's tendency of illustrating concepts through images and metaphors. Such is the case of the artwork, which is associated to the force field as well as to «[t]he phenomenon of fireworks»⁴⁵. Nonetheless, the same could apply also to Adorno's characterization of philosophy itself, whose labor is exemplified by Sisyphus' fatigue⁴⁶. Such figurative – in the sense of *bildliche* – definitions allow Adorno to avoid the rigid conceptual sedimentation of standard logic. In this sense, as we have seen, the force field exhibits artwork's processual character as the enactment of its antagonisms by letting them free to explode. Without ossifying the conflictuality on either contrasting moment, the aesthetic trait that permeates that image enables us to truly experience the unfolding of tensions again.

Perceiving the experiential content that accumulates along the conflictual movement marks a breach in the generalized context of substantial anaesthetization, which conversely dulls it through a deadly harmonisation. Hence, the aesthetic seems to possess a strong critical value that emerges in its capacity of articulating and displaying nexuses, which accounts for a meaningful modality of being, other than that of universal iterability. It is of the utmost interest then that such a capacity to exhibit interplays is also the peculiar feature that Berleant attributes to the aesthetic, himself using the same metaphor of the field. To conclude then, my paper aimed to show the importance of Adorno's recourse to the analogy of the force field as a modality of unfolding antagonisms, without suffocating them in a deadly harmonisation. In such context, what may seem to have just an aesthetic meaning has, conversely, a crucial impact on the extra-aesthetic situation and, therefore, on the more general ambition of Adorno's thought. In the antagonisms that the artworks as force fields aesthetically enact, society and art find their fundamental relation and, with that, the latter's critical potential too: «that of an unreconciled reality that nevertheless wants reconciliation»⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ A. Maharaj, *The dialectics of aesthetic agency: reevaluating German aesthetics from Kant to Adorno*, Bloomsbury, London, 2013, p. 163.

⁴⁵ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, cit., p. 81.

⁴⁶ See for example, *ibid.*, p. 258.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

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