

THE APHORISM AND THE 'HISTORICAL IMAGE': MINIMA MORALIA AND ADORNO'S POLITICS OF FORM

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This essay focuses on a single aphorism from Minima Moralia which addresses, in a very particular way, the question of nature. The aphorism, Mammoth, takes as its starting point a newspaper article announcing the discovery of a 'well-preserved dinosaur in Utah', and places this archaeological find in relation to a constellation of cultural forms, King Kong, the Loch Ness monster, tigers, zoos, and Karl Hagenbeck, the animal dealer who designed one of the first 'open zoos' in Hamburg in 1907. For Louise Green, this aphorism offers a creative way of considering how it might be possible to talk about nature at the current historical moment, a moment in which anxiety about the environment is everywhere and environmental crisis often seems to supercede, even obliterate, other forms of crisis.

Mammoth. –... The more purely nature is preserved and transplanted by civilization, the more implacably it is dominated. We can now afford to encompass ever larger natural units, and leave them apparently intact within our grasp, whereas previously the selecting and taming of particular items bore witness of the difficulty we still had in coping with nature. The tiger endlessly pacing back and forth in his cage reflects back negatively, something of humanity, but not the one frolicking behind the pit too wide to leap. ... The

fact however that animals do really suffer more in cages than in the open range, that Hagenbeck does represent a step forward in humanity, reflects on the inescapability of imprisonment. It is a consequence of history. The zoological gardens in their authentic form are products of nineteenth century colonial imperialism. They flourished since the opening-up of wild regions of Africa and Central Asia, which paid symbolic tribute in the shape of animals. The value of the tributes was measured by their exoticism, their inaccessibility. The development of technology has put an end to this and abolished the exotic. (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 115-116)

Aphorisms are the mode of writing that remains most loyal to the inaccessibility of a wholly objective perspective: they are not arguments but reflective understandings and judgments (Bernstein 43).

In his most literary text, *Minima Moralia*, German philosopher Theodor Adorno employs the aphorism to consider, in a unique way, problems of experience and subjectivity. Written in the mid 1940s while Adorno was in exile in California, the text is a sustained reflection on the ethics of form, and the possibilities opened up by juxtaposition as a combinatory practice.

Composed as a series of fragments, *Minima Moralia* reflects upon those minute details of everyday experience that give form to contemporary life. In the preface Adorno writes: 'He who wishes to know the truth about life in its immediacy must scrutinize it in its estranged form, the objective powers that determine individual existence even in its most hidden recesses' (1978:15). Although the objects of scrutiny here are the 'objective powers', in a sense it

is the 'hidden recesses' that seem to engage Adorno's attention most thoroughly. Like many modernist writers, he explores the neglected and incomprehensible details of everyday life which form the surface of day-to-day interactions. What Adorno's text takes as its object is not the discovery of the hidden 'intentions' of reality, the identification of a concealed meaning or order, but rather the analysis of overlooked moments of reality, unguarded moments of what Adorno calls 'unintentional reality'.

This paper focuses on a single aphorism from *Minima Moralia* which addresses, in a very particular way, the question of nature. The aphorism, *Mammoth*, takes as its starting point a newspaper article announcing the discovery of a 'well-preserved dinosaur in Utah', and places this archaeological find in relation to a constellation of cultural forms, King Kong, the Loch Ness monster, tigers, zoos, and Karl Hagenbeck, the animal dealer who designed one of the first 'open zoos' in Hamburg in 1907. This aphorism, I suggest, offers an interesting way of considering how it might be possible to talk about nature at the current historical moment, a moment in which anxiety about the environment is everywhere and environmental crisis often seems to supercede, even obliterate other forms of crisis.

I want to use this aphorism in order to think about the way form holds certain conversation about nature at bay and facilitates others, and to consider the aphorism as a form which permits or enables the holding together of different orders of knowledge. For Gary Saul Morson the aphorism should be considered in relation to other forms which fall within the category of quotations. In a distinctly aphoristic style Morson makes a number of claims about the similarities and

differences between the various short forms which fall within this category. Along with maxims, dicta, witticisms and anecdotes, the aphorism refers to something already spoken, a wisdom which is at once startling and familiar, both strikingly singular in expression yet part of a general public knowledge. As distinct from maxims and dicta, Morson suggests the aphorism does not claim to express a generalizable self-evident truth, the solution to a mystery, but rather ‘asserts the essential mysteriousness of the world’ (221). Aphorisms he suggest, consist not in ‘solving puzzles but in deepening questions’ (221). He also asserts that aphorisms seek a specific occasion and that occasion is typically at ‘a conventional end point that now does not close but opens onto more mysteries’ (222).

Moreson uses the term ‘wisdom’ to indicate the aphorism’s tendency to occupy itself with ethical questions, with questions of conduct. He does not discuss what I think is one of the most interesting aspects of the aphorism which is its tendency to cross between different orders of knowledge. Crossing the conceptual territory of science, traditional knowledge, conventional wisdom, and cliché, the aphorism makes statements about ethical conduct and personal experience without insisting on universalizing principals. It offers instead a kind of short hand, everyday form for provisional ethical judgment, one that engages directly with experience and action or conduct.

In a fascinating article, Jakob Norberg suggests that *Minima Moralia* conforms to but also subverts to the genre of advice literature that was very popular in Germany and the US at the time of its first publication in the 1940s. This form enables Adorno to consider the relation between experience, conduct

and social structures in a way that opens experience to critical reflection.

Individual experience, Adorno asserts, can be relevant to a theorist of the social world, and not everything the individual does is entirely subservient or perfectly fitted to the inexorable work of vast collective structures. Yet one can illuminate moments of insight and incongruence without denying the individual subject’s social history. (Norberg 402)

The moments of insight and incongruence emerge in precisely those areas where the individual fails to perform his/her ‘scripted role’ or comes up against an intractable problem of conduct (Norberg 403)¹.

In discussing Adorno’s writing in relation to the production of an ethics within discourse, Bernstein links the form of the aphorism to that of the essay. He writes: ‘Aphorism and essay both begin ‘in the middle’ with a cultural artifact or practice that is imbued with history, including the history of what has been said about it. For this focus to be maintained, aphorism and essay must dispense with definitions, grounds, first principles; but equally they must dispense with the syntactic markers through which the legal rational authority of first principles and logical rules is transmitted to what falls under them’ (356). The cultural artifact is composed in part by what is said about it, the historical layers of utterances

¹ Norberg writes: ‘The practice of dwelling or lingering turns out to be a key notion for Adorno, insofar as it suggests an enduring focus that alone can trace individual subjects’ loss of their scripted roles in the social whole’ (403).



Dubai Airport
Photo: Nazeema Akar

which each seek to embed the object within a particular discursive genre. Taking a particular moment as a starting point, which is not the object’s origin or definition, the aphorism or essay mimics in its syntax the kind of relations it wishes to produce in the world. In other words juxtaposition replaces hierarchy as a method of apprehension and as a way of composing and arranging sentences.

In the remainder of this paper I want to do two things. Firstly, I want to look briefly at how *Mammoth*, one of the few aphorisms in *Minima Moralia* that makes direct reference to nature, deploys cliché, public opinion, science and sentiment *to produce nature as a complex concept, one which is at once universal and particular*. Secondly I want to use Adorno’s aphoristic method to consider two contemporary cultural artifacts that are themselves metonymic instances, synechdocal instances of nature as it is produced by the current environmental crisis. These cultural artifacts are both which I call ‘natural installation’, pieces of nature produced inside public buildings, one in Dubai airport and the other in the Natural History Museum in New York.



Dubai Airport
Photo: Nazeema Akar

The first ‘natural installation’ I encountered en route to the US recently, when I spent 8 hours at Dubai airport. Those of you who are familiar with this airport will know that it has two more or less identical wings and in each wing there is an indoor natural installation, real plants, real soil, green

trees, a pathway and a bench, a kind of oasis not only in the natural desert which is dimly visible through the windows of the airport but also in the desert of international travel, the bland standardized abstract world of schedules, boarding passes, airport sandwiches and security checks. What is interesting about this for me is not so much that natural forms are called upon as ornament or decoration but rather that instead of plastic plants, the standard decorative method, nature, in the form of some trees and shrubs, is reproduced authentically despite the difficulties of maintaining such a natural installation in an indoors environment.

The second ‘natural installation is housed in the relatively new ‘Hall of Biodiversity’ in the New York Natural History Museum. This segment of rainforest partially screened off behind glass, but crowding assertively out of this containment, is situated in the centre of the exhibition hall. On the side wall of the exhibition hall is a brightly lit display of animal specimens from moths to mammals. The Biodiversity hall is, as its name suggests, devoted to educating people about species extinctions and loss of biodiversity, and in one corner a documentary loop describes the destructive effects of industrialization and population expansion on the environment. These two examples, strangely similar despite their very different contexts, offer an interesting ‘middle point’ from which to enter the contemporary problem of nature. Before considering them in detail, however, I want to go back to Mammoth, and to consider the way in which Adorno himself conceptualized the work of *Minima Moralia*’s aphoristic fragments, fragments which he called not aphorisms but ‘historical images.’

‘MAMMOTH’ AS ‘HISTORICAL IMAGE’

Adorno used the term ‘constellation’ to describe the particular way in which what have come to be termed his ‘aphorisms’ juxtaposed elements from different orders of knowledge refusing a hierarchical ordering of the general and the particular.

The idea of the constellation as a form through which phenomena might be understood originates with Walter Benjamin and is first articulated in *The Origin of Tragic Drama*.² Brian O’Connor writes that:

Benjamin’s theory posits the idea of constellations, a metaphor which expresses the practice of philosophical truth. In this practice the subject mediates phenomena, striving to arrange them in such a way, in ‘constellations,’ that they might reveal their idea. Importantly ideas are neither generalizations nor subjective reconstructions in that they are the very intelligibility and truth of phenomena...In a constellation particular phenomena are not subsumed under universals. Rather the meaning of any phenomenon can emerge only when the phenomenon is understood as configured with certain other phenomena. (2000: 4)

What is significant about Benjamin’s conceptualization of the constellation is its emphasis on an arrangement of phenomena which avoids hierarchical

² In a letter to Adorno in July 1931 Benjamin comments on Adorno’s description of the task of philosophy: ‘I subscribe to this position. Yet I could not have written it without referring to the introduction of my book on Baroque Drama, where this entirely unique and, in the relative and modest sense in which such a thing can be claimed, new idea was first expressed’ (1999: 9).

ordering. The particular is never simply an example of a general rule. Phenomena instead become intelligible only in relation to other phenomena. The constellation allows seemingly incommensurable things to be placed alongside each other without reducing them to a relationship of equivalence. It makes visible the contradictory aspect of the real; introducing awkward material complexity into the smooth logic of any systematic organization.

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Constellations of phenomena are always provisional, unlike stellar constellations which appear from the perspective of historical time to be eternal and unchanging. The elements are constantly rearranged until the moment when the image emerges. It introduces what Fredric Jameson refers to as a 'pseudo-totality'. He writes:

Pseudo-totality: the illusion of the total system is aroused and encouraged by the systematic links and cross references established between a range of concepts, while the baleful spell of the system itself is then abruptly exorcised by the realization that the order of presentation is non-binding, that it might have been arranged in an utterly different fashion, so that, as in a divinatory cast, all the elements are present but the form of their juxtapositions, the shape of their falling out, is merely occasional. This kind of *Darstellung*, which seeks specifically to undermine its own provisional

architectonic, Benjamin called configuration or constellation... (1990: 50)

In Adorno's formulation in 1931, he favours the term 'historical image' over Benjamin's notion of the 'idea' (Buck-Morss 102). Historical image emphasizes both the contingent and the material quality of whatever might emerge from the constellation as well as the fact that the image itself is not intuitive or metaphysical but rather produced by human subjects through analysis. What philosophy takes as its object, however, is not the discovery of the hidden 'intentions' of reality, the identification of a concealed meaning or order, but rather the analysis of overlooked moments of reality. Adorno refers to these unguarded moments as 'unintentional reality.'

The phenomenal elements which make up the constellation are, Buck-Morss suggests, 'codes' or 'ciphers' of social reality, seemingly insignificant things like a popular song, fleeting events such as a concert and easily overlooked details such as certain fragments, images or metaphors in a philosophical text. In themselves, she explains, such phenomenal elements have no fixed value. They might be judged positive in one constellation, negative in another (1977: 99). They become meaningful/intelligible only in relation to the other elements in the constellation.

The aphorism *Mammoth* begins with a reference to piece of scientific knowledge reported in 'American newspapers': the discovery of a well-preserved dinosaur in the state of Utah. *In a gesture which refuses to acknowledge the sanctity of science*, this dinosaur is placed alongside such creatures as the Loch Ness monster, an invention of folklore and King Kong, an invention of popular film culture. All these creatures

have in some way been equalized by their entry into the public domain. The first assertion, that popular fascination with the monstrous, with unimaginably huge creatures such as the dinosaur, giant gorillas and sea snakes reflects an attempt to assimilate the 'monstrous total state,' is tried but found to be inadequate. The dinosaur is not only to be read allegorically as reflecting something about popular anxieties about the state, it is also to be read metonymically as a representative of nature. Adorno argues that: 'the desire for the presence of the most ancient is a hope that animal creation might survive the wrong man has done it, if not man himself, and give rise to a better species, one that finally makes a success of life. Zoological gardens stem from the same hope. They are laid out on the pattern of Noah's ark, for since their inception the bourgeois class has been waiting for the flood' (1978: 115).

The 'hope' that dinosaurs and zoological gardens inspire, Adorno suggests, relates to the sense dimly acknowledged but not rationally accepted (at least not in the 1940s) of the damage done to nature in order to make possible the lifestyle of industrial capitalism. In this hoped for future 'man' would be sidelined (animal creation would survive the wrong man has done) and a better species would emerge which 'finally makes a success of life' (115). In a typically Adornian fashion the slightly mocking judgment is contained in the qualifying subclause, the idea that animal creation might even survive 'man himself.' This reference to the extinction of man is particularly interesting when considered in relation to the current sense of environmental crisis that at the level of popular or media culture has produced numerous narratives articulating precisely this fear

and fantasy of human extinction.³ The zoo, and the ark in this aphorism can be seen as allegories for animal creation reduced merely to specimens or mating pairs, preserved against a disaster. Yet to see disaster in terms of the extinction of species, misses what for Adorno is the important point which is that the management of nature, its preservation and transplantation, as well as its reduction to species or specimens is already loss, even disaster. A form of thinking which subsumes animals under the general categories of species, allows them to enter the discussion only as representatives of a category, as abstractions. Unlike the tiger pacing furiously or in bewilderment in the cage, these specimens can not challenge human conduct, cannot reflect back anything of what Adorno terms at this point ‘humanity’.

Mammoth as aphorism or historical image addresses the problem of nature at a historical moment which bears a strange resemblance to our own. If the question of extinction nowadays could just as easily be introduced with a cultural artifact such as the wild dog shopping bag (which states that only 450 wild dogs still exist in South Africa), this aphoristic critique of the conceptual limitation of thinking about “nature” as a simple concept, is one which still seems relevant. Now more than ever animals are consigned to the ‘rule of experts’.

SPECIES

In a recent article, Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that climate change represents a challenge for existing

³ See for instance the best selling *The World without Us*, by Alan Weisman which Chakrabarty discusses in his article, *The Climate of History* (2009).



Dzanga-Sangha Rainforest Diorama, Hall of Biodiversity, American Museum of Natural History
Photo: Louise Green

explanatory or analytic frameworks for understanding history. He notes that all his ‘readings in theories of globalization, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies and postcolonial criticism over the last twenty-five years, while enormously useful in studying globalization, had not really prepared me for making sense of this planetary conjuncture within which humanity finds itself today’(199).

For Chakrabarty, climate change, introduces into the domain of history a requirement to think again at the level of the species. He argues that while it is no doubt the case that industrial capitalism has been responsible for the conditions which have lead to climate change, a critique of capitalism is no longer adequate to the sort of crisis that is emerging. He writes that:

It seems true that the crisis of climate change has been necessitated by the high-energy consuming

models of society that capitalist industrialization has created and promoted, but the current crisis has brought into view certain other conditions for the existence of life in the human form that have no intrinsic connection to the logics of capitalist, nationalist, or socialist identities.

They are connected rather to the history of life on this planet, the way different life-forms connect to one another, and the way the mass extinction of one species could spell danger for another. Without such a history of life, the crisis of climate change has no human “meaning.” For, as I have said before, it is not a crisis for the inorganic planet in any meaningful sense. (217)

While there is not place here to rehearse Chakrabarty’s argument in detail, the point I wish to take from his argument is both the necessity and the difficulty of thinking together the two incommensurable narratives of globalization and global warming, human history and natural history. I say incommensurable because these two different narratives/epistemological frameworks work with, or have worked with in the past, different orders of time as well as with different conceptions of agency, event and causation.

He goes on to consider what it would mean to introduce the notion of species into a historical account of human activity.

Who is the we? We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. There could be no phenomenology of us as a species. Even if we were to emotionally identify with a word like *mankind*, we would not know what

being a species is, for, in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species as indeed would be any other life form. But one never experiences being a concept. (220)

In a sense what Chakrabarty seems to be asking is: what would it mean to recognize the human as one species among many and not one that, according to Adorno, has ‘made a success of life’.

NATURAL INSTALLATIONS

To return to my two examples of natural installations. In each, though in very different ways, nature is produced as an affective marker, as a texture to supplement the concept of nature. If in the airport the motive is, I assume, consolatory and remedial – nature as a relief from the alienating abstraction of international travel – it is also most spectacularly a work of artifice, part of Dubai’s massive project of self-creation. The green trees and shrubs are certainly not natural to the environment of the desert any more than the rainforest is natural to New York. Visually the garden occupies a place alongside a sign directing travelers to the Spa and Health club on an upper floor. It is part of the airport’s total design which creates an environment in which the individual can take care of themselves, in which the needs of the body and the mind, perhaps even the soul, are catered for in the precinct itself. ‘Nature’ in the abstract (I say abstract because it is not grounded in any actual locality) is called upon, is produced to provide a concrete experience, the experience of well-being, associated with being in a place of natural beauty.

The rainforest installation in the museum is

surrounded by a very different kind of text. The notice boards, images, and documentary film all have an overtly educational intention – the rainforest is there to supplement the concept of rainforest, to make real in some sense the loss that is being described. The two installations then illuminate nature in its two modalities: one - the Dubai airport installation - produced for the individual as soothing, grounding, particularity; the other – the rainforest installation – produced for the species as a metonymic reference to nature as universal, that nature which is already, as a consequence of human action, lost. Yet ultimately what both testify to in the end is the ability of human technology to dominate nature, to produce it on demand, to produce it as something which, as Adorno writes, “is a consequence of history”.

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