

ON ALBRECHT WELLMER: MUSIC AND MODERNISM AFTER HABERMAS

Tyrus Miller

University of California at Santa Cruz
Division of Humanities
Department of Literature

The work of Jürgen Habermas had a decisive effect on the current of Frankfurt School thought, leading to the critique and even abandonment of a number of defining elements of its first-generation programme and to an on-going reconstruction of other elements in light of Habermas's "theory of communicative action". Here, I will touch exclusively on one subset of the work of a key post-Habermasian thinker,¹ Albrecht Wellmer, who has published an important set of essays on aesthetics, particularly pertaining to the aesthetics of modern music.² Having taken as his starting-point Adorno's strong association, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, of art's validity with both conceptual truth and social emancipation, and having attempted to reconstruct these claims within a post-metaphysical phi-

* Author contact information: ??

¹ For a discussion of recent work in the Frankfurt School, contextualized in relation to earlier work, see Joel Anderson, "The Third Generation of the Frankfurt School," online at: <http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/scholaractivists/00JoelAnderson3rdGeneration.htm>, and "Selected Writings of German Members of the 'Third Generation' of the Frankfurt School," at: <http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/scholaractivists/00JoelAnderson3rdGenBibliography.htm>

² Albrecht Wellmer, "Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity" in Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991) 1-35. Other relevant sources not directly cited here include Wellmer's discussions of philosophy of language and interpretation in: *Endgames: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998), and *Wie Worte Sinn machen: Aufsätze zur Sprachphilosophie* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2007).

osophy influenced by Habermas, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wellmer offers a useful perspective for focusing a set of specific claims about art and aesthetics in a “critical” vein: critical in the philosophical sense of both establishing the range of ways in which modernist aesthetics may have ethical, political, conceptual, and existential efficacy and the limits within which it exerts its possible effects.

To address Wellmer’s approach to modernist art works, I will begin with the more general frameworks of the aesthetic reception that he formulates. Notably, he orients his arguments towards reception in an explicit critique of Peter Bürger (among others), who, Wellmer argues, establishes a novel constellation of reality, art, and living praxis, but does so by abolishing the notion of “aesthetic semblance” and privileges “the significance of this constellation of reality for artistic production over its significance for reception” (*PoM* 17). In other words, for Bürger the decisive issue is how artists relate their production to the institutions of art—reflexively embodying autonomy in a modernist form or breaking with autonomy in the activist modes of avant-garde art—whereas Wellmer suggests that a focus on reception may mitigate some of the either-or dilemmas Bürger poses. Accordingly (and though he does not cite the essay, Wellmer here echoes Adorno’s important, late essay “Culture and Administration”³), while Bürger formulates the avant-garde break as the abolition of a culture of artistic experts, Wellmer argues that transforming the institution of art would entail the *democratization* of the communicative interchange between experts and a broader constituency with a plurality of interest and engagements with art: “I argue on the assumption that a transformation of the ‘institution of art’ cannot mean the abolition of the ‘culture of experts,’ but that it would amount rather to the establishment of a tighter network of connections between the culture of experts and the life-world on the one hand, and the culture of experts and popular art on the other” (*PoM* 31). In turn, he argues, art can play a role in a broader process of democratic emancipation: “we can defend the idea of an altered relationship between art and the life-world in which a democratic praxis would be able to draw productively on the innovative and communicative potential of art” (*PoM* 31).

In developing this view, Wellmer sets out from the everyday communicative competencies of both makers and receivers of artworks. Both artists and audience members are, in this view, socialized individuals who have histories of participating in everyday practices of communication, both oral and written (and increasingly, televisual and digital). Their everyday competencies include a range of functions, from pragmatic, instrumental uses to aesthetically, emo-

³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Culture and Administration,” in *The Culture Industry* 107-31.

tionally, and existentially expressive uses of language, images, performing acts, and other signs. Their multifaceted participation in everyday communication will have shaped, to a greater or lesser degree, their abilities to use discourse consciously and make deliberative judgments about the discourse of others. In the course of performing everyday communication, in particular, they will have become competent in making and evaluating discursive claims to “truth” in a number of different dimensions. These truth-dimensions include: the *factual dimension* of how a statement representing a state of affairs measures up against our experience of the state of affairs itself; the *expressive dimension* of a statement’s “truthfulness” or authenticity in relation to a speaker’s personal beliefs, feelings, and way of life; and *the dimension of moral, practical, and emotional “rightness”* of a statement with respect to a concrete situation of life, measured against a background of culturally shared or even universally, human values and norms. Moreover, not only do they gain communicative competences in performing and evaluating claims to truth in these different dimensions; even in the relatively loose contexts of everyday life, they may also have become aware of the potential for dissonance between these different dimensions of truth employed in discourse: what we know to be true factually may nevertheless, for example, be morally repugnant to us or inadequate to our personal, existential sense of who we are. Lastly, as part of their own personal and professional biographies, individuals may have succeeded in composing and integrating these different truth-dimensions into larger, more coherent wholes that are characteristic of their characters and lives. Everyday discourse, however, tends to shift sequentially between these dimensions and connect them at most in only loosely coordinated ways. It tolerates wide latitude for dissonance, bad faith, lack of awareness, and outright contradiction in the relations between these discursively embodied domains of truth.

In taking up the question of how art relates to these different dimensions of truth, Wellmer makes two specifications. First, he suggests, art does not so much literally represent truth as mobilize a *potential* for truth: “The truth content of works of art would then be the epitome of the potential effects of works of art that are *relevant* to the truth, or of their potential for *disclosing* truth” (*PoM* 24). This potential for truth in artworks is, however, related to a second specification: the claims to truth that artworks carry are related to their claims of aesthetic validity. To put it otherwise, only insofar as a work is aesthetically “right” does it realize its potential relevance to other sorts of truth; the aesthetically valid work allows us to focus on and evaluate some potential truth that previously was imperceptible, before being represented to us in a concentrated, specially framed experience of art. Wellmer goes on to suggest that insofar as art mediates its relation to truth through aesthetic validity, through its complex

“rightness” as composition, it is particularly suited to reveal the interactions and interferences of the different sorts of truth comprised in everyday communication: factual, moral, and expressive dimensions. As Wellmer writes:

It transpires... that art is *involved* in questions of truth in a peculiar and complex way: not only does art open up the experience of reality, and correct and expand it; it is also the case that aesthetic “validity” (i.e. the “rightness” of a work of art) *touches on* questions of truth, truthfulness, and moral and practical correctness in an intricate fashion without being attributable to any one of the three dimensions of truth, or even to all three together. We might therefore suppose that the ‘truth of art’ can only be defended, if at all, as a phenomenon of interference between the various dimensions of truth. (*PoM* 22-23)

Aesthetic reception attends to the intimate connection between the formal dimension of art works (or works, events, and performances that, by virtue of compositional qualities have been assimilated to art) and this reflexive work on a pluri-dimensional truth. To put this another way, aesthetic reception seeks to reveal how aesthetic validity (the “rightness” of artistic choices and structures) shapes a particular complex vision of truth—the possible interferences of factual, subjective, and moral truths in concrete human situations, and the ways in which, over time, these interferences may be negotiated. Focused in this way, this conception of the aesthetic helps us to interpret in a more rigorous light certain loosely shared aspects and background motivations of the critical, reflexive tendencies of modernist art and literature. Modernism represents the intentional practice of composing artworks that aim to reorient the communicative life of their receivers, offering them new ways of making sense not only within the microcosm of the artistic encounter, but also within the broader parameters of their everyday communication.

Wellmer’s aesthetic writings are most directly related to the *Aesthetic Theory* of Adorno, as an immanent critique and reconstruction of Adorno’s thought on reception-related and “communicative action”-oriented grounds. Adorno, as noted in my earlier chapter, developed his aesthetic theory teleologically around its contemporary endpoint, to establish and justify the fragile possibility of a critical modernism in an age tending towards the abolition of art. Critical modernism, as Adorno discerned it in a few singular, communicatively resistant works by Schönberg, Picasso, Kafka, and Beckett, gave testimony to the trace of “something else” in the hour of its disappearance into the night of indifference. In his focus on the experience of art as potentially disrupting the ease with which we ascribe cognitive, moral, and personal-existential “truth” not only to the aesthetic event, but also to everyday and perhaps even specialized statements and acts, Wellmer retains Adorno’s sense of art’s special relation to truth. Moreover, it is easy to see that Adorno’s justification of difficult, complex

modernist art can be well-encompassed by Wellmer's revisionary perspective. When, for example, we puzzle over whether Beckett's "Molloy" and "Moran" in the novel *Molloy* are versions of the same character rather than two different ones, our inability to resolve the question may unsettle the self-understood existential truth that whatever else we might know or not know, we know who we are; Beckett's disruptions of character-identification might lead us to believe that holding onto a sense of self might not be so easy in the world we live in. Similarly, listening to a piece of atonal music, which has been emancipated from harmony as an organizing principle, we may perceive with new vividness various forms of local order that alternate throughout the longer piece: such musical means as the repetition and variation of rhythmic figures, sharp alternations between high and low pitches, the surprising dissemination of motifs among instruments of contrasting timbres, and the ways that dissonances are heightened or mitigated by each of these. Obviously, within the aesthetic experience of music, these various interacting forms of post-harmonic patterning call for different modes of attention and evaluation on the part of listeners. But new perceptual, affective, and cognitive intuitions originating in the experience of music need not remain encapsulated within the purely musical, but can extend by analogy to other dimensions of moral, existential, affective, and cognitive life. Indeed, Adorno himself is an extreme example of the contrary, insofar as he carried his musical training into a whole new way of writing philosophy and conceiving the nature of philosophical reflection. Martin Jay captured this translation of modernist music into philosophy well in his characterization of Adorno's negative dialectics as "atonal philosophy".⁴

Despite this proximity to Adorno—rendered even closer by Wellmer's intimate knowledge of modern and contemporary music, unique among the major followers of Habermas—Wellmer also diverges from Adorno on a number of key points in his interpretation of modernist art. First, since his focus is on how artworks impact listeners, viewers, and readers as agents within a plurality of communicative practices (a Habermasian perspective), rather than on the production of artworks as complex constellations of subjective and objective elements mediated by artistic form (Adorno's perspective), Wellmer abandons a key element of Adorno's theory: his prescriptive focus on "progress" in the disposition of "artistic material," which in turn leads him to dichotomous formulations such as the Schönberg / Stravinsky opposition elaborated in *Philosophy of the New Music*. Individual receivers of artworks are also social agents who live, act, think, work, and speak within a differentiated, plural set of social institutions, rules, and discourses. The question of what sort of artwork might

⁴ Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984).

play a critical or even emancipatory role cannot be unilaterally determined by formal-material features, rooted in artistic production. The “progressive” effects of artworks depend on situational aspects of reception as well, which can positively motivate a far wider range of artistic forms, registers (“high” culture to “popular” and “counter” culture), and modes (“classical,” jazz, pop, etc.) than Adorno was willing to contemplate.

This artistic pluralism—comparable to that advocated by Bürger—is most striking precisely where Wellmer moves upon Adorno’s signature artistic territory, in the field of modern classical and post-serialist “new” music. Wellmer’s recent collection of musicological writings, *Essay on Music and Language*,⁵ offers a wide-ranging treatment of different musical examples, including a sympathetic examination of two major composers who represent opposing, influential directions in post-war “new music”: John Cage, as the anarchist advocate of non-intentionality, indeterminacy, and chance in musical composition, as well as the expansion of musical materials to the whole range of natural and human sounds; and Helmut Lachenmann, as a rigorous, militantly politicized inventor of musical methodologies that extend serial techniques to new dimensions of instrumental and vocal sound, timbre, rhythm, and text. Rather than setting up an Adorno-like dichotomy of Cage’s anarchic informality and Lachenmann’s political and formal rigor, Wellmer offers a measured assessment of their artistic projects as complementary, if antipodal paradigms of new music.

The final chapter on *Essay on Music and Language*, entitled “Transgressive Figures in the Field of New Music,” affirms a concept of “postmodernism” that is “equivalent neither to turning away from *the* modern nor with the return of an emphatic claim for art, but rather much more with a *pluralistic* modernism” (*Versuch* 302). Wellmer not only argues for this modernist pluralism philosophically, but goes on to survey an open field of musical possibilities represented by particular composers and their works. Not accidentally, given Adorno’s exclusive opposition of Schönberg and Stravinsky, Wellmer follows the lead of Pierre Boulez in presenting them as complementary figures through whom the structural apparatus of tonality was disrupted and dismantled, with one focusing on the destruction of tonal hierarchy through serial formalization and the other on “informal” rhythmic and instrumental violence to tonal organization.⁶ He goes on, however, to suggest other ways in which the emancipation of the musical

⁵ Albrecht Wellmer, *Versuch über Musik und Sprache* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2009).

⁶ Pierre Boulez, “Style or Idea?—In Praise of Amnesia” and “The Stravinsky-Webern Conjunction” in *Orientations: Collected Writings*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, trans. Martin Cooper (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986) 349-59 and 364-69. David Roberts calls attention to Boulez’s essay in *Art and Enlightenment* 117-21.

field has proceeded—exemplifying not a dialectical logic of opposites (Schönberg / Stravinsky, progress / regression, formalization / dissolution of form), as in Adorno, but a progressive differentiation of musical experience through the enrichment of compositional technique. Thus, for example, he enumerates: the expansion of the field of sound through electronic and aleatory musics; the exploration of microtonal elements through tremolo, glissandi, new vocal articulations, and use of non-Western and historical musical materials that reveal the contingency of classical and twelve-tone music's chromatic scale; the recourse to parts of the overtone series and other features of physical sound suppressed by tempered harmonics; the focus on gestural and tactile aspects of instrumental sound, as well as the dramatic aspects of their performance; the highlighting of spatial features of musical sound; the structuring of musical pieces as a direct intervention into the listener's perceptual faculties and bodily sensations; and the hybridization of new music with cross-overs into jazz, hip-hop, gypsy music, rock and roll, and other forms of popular music. Accordingly, he incorporates into his open, non-exclusive canon of pluralistic modernism in music such highly divergent composers as John Cage, Giacinto Scelsi, Pierre Boulez, Pierre Schaeffer, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Helmut Lachenmann, György Ligeti, Hans-Werner Henze, Luigi Nono, György Kurtág, Luciano Berio, Heinz Hollinger, Mauricio Kagel, Iannis Xenakis, Cornelius Cardew, Alvin Lucier, Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Erhard Grosskopf, Georg Friedrich Haas, Hans Zenders, Hilda Paredes, Clemens Gadenstätter, Gene Coleman, Bernard Lang, Klaus Huber, and Isabel Mundry: a very diverse, multi-generational catalogue of post-war composers that could undoubtedly be extended greatly beyond Wellmer's largely German and Central European "new music" focus. The modernist pluralism represented by this list, moreover, allows Wellmer to reach back into Adorno's modernism and open up the historical past that Adorno's philosophy of music mediated to future generations of critical theorists and musicologists: not only do Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schönberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern represent "authentic" instances of musical modernism, according to Adorno, but also Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky, Olivier Messiaen, Edgar Varèse, Henry Cowell, Charles Ives, Béla Bartók, Ivan Wyschnegradsky, and Alois Haba. "Post-modern," Wellmer writes, "would be... the consciousness of an infinite plurality of musical materials, including that of extra-European traditions, as well as the various procedures at the disposition [of composers] since the second half of the 20th century" (*Versuch* 302). Wellmer's "postmodern," however, does not come *after* modernism, but is rather the pluralization of modernism itself, which branches forward into a field of ever-greater differentiation as it extends into and past the later 20th century.

Moreover, in a passage in which he discusses the use of highly complex rhythmic structures and speeds and their effects on the senses and bodies of listeners, we catch a glimpse of the Utopian, futuristic possibilities that works of the historical avant-garde, from Marinetti and Khlebnikov to Schwitters and Breton, adumbrated, a total reinvention of the human sensorium. Describing the unaccustomed relations to the human body that the soundscapes of recent music establish, Wellmer evokes the Utopian suggestion of a transfigured body that would be adapted to the textures and speeds of a virtual world:

Many of these rhythms race more swiftly ahead and oscillate more rapidly than would ever be possible for the body; many have a strongly gestural character, yet correspond to no known bodily or linguistic movement. While the early postwar composers presented the structures and skeletons for new, strange worlds, contemporary composers now create the flesh, muscle, and nervous systems not of traditional bodies, rather of completely new creatures that accordingly advance along an unfamiliar border of a “virtual movement.” (*Versuch* 310)

Wellmer’s evocation of creatures with radically different bodily and sensory characteristics harks back to an earlier moment of critical theory, Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the expressionist writer Paul Scheerbart’s *Lesabéndio* and his fascination with the utopian atmospheres of Scheerbart’s fictional planet. Scheerbart describes the sonorous space of the double funnel-shaped asteroid-planet, Pallas, which is designed by the author as a kind of total musical environment in which the inhabitants, with their extraterrestrial alien bodies, are continuously immersed. The planet itself is a kind of natural wind instrument, which has been adapted by the Pallasians into an enveloping musical and sound-space:

Refined music resounded out of the depths of the funnel, including strange tones that were held and sustained for long periods of time. This music emanated from the Central Hole connecting the north and south funnels.

Here in the Center, where the funnel walls were steep and sometimes separated from each other by no more than half a mile, here in the very heart of the star, winds caused by the speedy descent of the cobweb-cloud at nightfall made the hole emit wonderful sounds.

Because of the interior music of Pallas, which, naturally, could be heard best from the star’s southern funnel, the Pallasians had set up many large, thin pieces of skin to strengthen the sounds and to link them into a melodious sonic flow. These hides were stretched and mounted in such a way as to cause the tones brought forth by the steep cliff walls to vary in a marvelous fashion. The pieces of skin were set up so that they would be easy to move to different spots in the larger system. The moveable skins created fantastical harmonies naturally amplified by the acoustics of the funnels. Certain capacious metal instruments could even make the noises seem orchestral. (Scheerbart, 2012; 26-27)

One could imagine that this is just the sort of music that creatures whose bodies are nothing but a “rubbery tube leg with a suction-cup foot at one end,” an umbrella-shaped flexible head, and telescoping eyes would enjoy hearing. Yet turning around the perspective in light of Wellmer’s discussion of contemporary music, we might also say that such a sound environment as Scheerbart describes, not unlike that of a contemporary composition exploring the resonant properties of materials and spaces and immersing the listener in slowly pulsating rhythms, also *evokes* bodies more like those of the Pallasians than the bodies with which the listeners walked into the concert hall. Their harmony with such an environment implies that human bodies, such as we possess, would find it very, well, alien. Yet in *Lesabéndio*, as in the musical worlds created by contemporary composers, we are also asked to imagine and empathize with creaturely forms radically other than our own: to become them for a time. For the duration of the musical experience, as for the duration of our reading of Scheerbart, our bodies are aesthetically stretched and compressed, broken and reassembled, in ways that give us a sensuous intuition of new bodies, a shimmering succession of virtual bodies evoked by the dissonances and tensions between our natural bodies and the techno-compositional environments to which we have submitted ourselves. Wellmer concludes that this temporary plunge into strangeness, into apparent senselessness or nonsense that is characteristic of avant-garde art, is the occasion for the production of new thought and feeling. “Upon such new thought and feeling produced by new music,” he quotes Karlheinz Stockhausen, “we can successively construct experiences, *learning processes*” (Stockhausen, quoted in *Versuch* 311). The extension, by Stockhausen and subsequently Wellmer, of the key Habermasian concept of “learning processes” to aesthetic experience—to the non-discursive sonorous intensities of new music—at once demonstrates their indebtedness to Habermas’s thought, and underscores the bold step beyond Habermas’s discourse-based, rationalistic theory they must make when challenged by a complex aesthetic phenomenon.