Rethinking Aesthetic Humanism: Schiller After Agamben and Rancière

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Abstract

Rethinking Aesthetic Humanism: Schiller after Rancière and Agamben

Thiti Owlarn

2021

Since de Man, aesthetic humanism is often thought of as an ideology that valorizes the arts and their capacity to improve humanity. This study argues that something more important is at stake in Schiller’s aesthetics. Following Rancière, I argue that aesthetic experience is inherently meaning-disruptive and therefore not utilizable as means to an end. The fact that the aesthetic has this means-without-end structure allows us to reconceive of humanity, like Agamben, not as a rational animal or an end-setting subject, but as a figure of surplus potential, a life that gives itself form without being reducible to a specific way of living. Aesthetic education seen in this light is not an education of the senses but the development of our capacity to suspend the sense/reason opposition to live as a form-of-life. However, since the only way humanity can achieve this is by instituting a non-administrative state, aesthetic humanism demands social change through action, not art or the contemplation of human potential. Schiller thus shows us the limits of Rancière’s and Agamben’s politics.
Rethinking Aesthetic Humanism:
Schiller after Agamben and Rancière

A Dissertation
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of
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Doctor of Philosophy
by
Thiti Owlarn
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PREFACE

The following work is a study of Schiller’s aesthetics through the lens of Rancière and Agamben. But it is not just a reading of Schillerian aesthetics. It is also the sketch of a landscape. The landscape encompass stretches of land that people often regard as separate. Chief among these are aesthetics, ethics, and politics.

It is said that aesthetics does not mix with politics, that an ethical stance towards the arts is completely different from the so-called ‘disinterest’ of the aesthetic attitude. In literary studies, such claims are often backed with theories prescribing how one ought to read a text. For some, the responsible way to read a literary text is to regard it as something that cannot be mastered. Sometimes, that means respecting its ambiguity or undecidability. Sometimes, it means accepting the text as sublime and ungraspable. For others, the reason we ought to read literature is to bring to our attention the obscured voice of the Other. This might be done directly through representations of injustice. Or, it might be done indirectly through the performance of language and the roles that it constructs. For yet another group of readers, literary texts are products of political ideologies whose prejudices are available for scrutiny from the perceptive reader. The task of reading, seen from this perspective, is to critically reveal the text’s hidden value commitments beneath its aesthetic surface. These are all valid ways of reading literature. They also share a common ground.

What is this common ground? It is not, as is often claimed, the simple rejection of aesthetics in favor of ethics or politics. What unites these anti-aesthetic ways of reading is itself the very ground of the aesthetic. It is the operation of non-identity, $p = \text{not-}p$. Non-identity is what allows us to regard language or society as fundamentally non-self-identical.
It is also what allows us to dis-identify with pre-given social practices, identities, and roles to create space for the performance of something new. This is not a reductive claim. It does not lessen the multifaceted richness and complexity contained in the ways we have been reading literature in the past century. Non-identity is the essence of the aesthetic, but it also enables the conception of ethics and politics that inform our current reading practices, even the ones that are purportedly anti-aesthetic. Schiller was the first to articulate this insight in a theoretically sound manner. His most important work, the Ästhetische Briefe, remains a seminal text for our times, not only because it shows how our notions of the ethical and the political are based on an operation that is essentially aesthetic, but also because it shows the limits of what these notions of the ethical and the political can and cannot do.

Unfortunately, we have forgotten how to read Schiller. The name ‘Schiller’ today is associated with ideas that are decidedly un-Schillerian. To counteract the prejudices and clichés that haunt contemporary readings of Schiller, it is necessary to juxtapose Schiller with more recent thinkers – thinkers who continue Schiller’s project in new and unexpected ways. This is why, in the following work, we will be reading Schiller in conjunction with Rancière’s and Agamben’s recent writings. Schiller’s Ästhetische Briefe is often read in an overly reductive and historicizing manner. By treating Rancière’s and Agamben’s works as extensions of Schiller’s text, the latter is liberated from unnecessary pedantic constraints. This is what is meant in the title with the word ‘rethinking.’

Alas, this work is a relatively short piece of text, but the ground it attempts to cover is vast. Just as the Ästhetische Briefe left too many thoughts implicit that needs to be made explicit by a future commentator, many readers of this text may find it to be rather more
suggestive than conclusive. This text is less of an argument and more of a series of sketches. Indeed, that is both its strength and its weakness. The text tries to show how the terrain that encompasses aesthetics, ethics, and politics is based on the operation of the non-identical, and how this operation came from Schiller, not Kant. It tries to show how a certain notion of the political and of the human arise out of this operation, and how the works of Rancière and Agamben are, among other things, a faithful continuation of these Schillerian ideas. Finally, it tries to show how the idea of the aesthetic state – Schiller’s version of political utopia – requires us to move beyond Rancière’s non-committal politics and Agamben’s contemplative ethics towards the concrete actualization of institutions that improve human lives. These thoughts are all closely interconnected. Indeed, they grow sequentially out of one another. But the end result is not a coherent whole – it is a series of disparate sketches. And perhaps that is fitting, for as Wittgenstein remarks in the preface to the *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, a landscape cannot be shown whole: it is gradually revealed through a series of crisscrossing images forming something like a photo album. What follows is an album of images of the terrain encompassing aesthetics, ethics, and politics. It is more than fragments and yet less than complete. That might be frustrating from the perspective of conceptual understanding, but regarded as landscape sketches, nothing is missing.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the tremendous support that I had received from friends, colleagues, and the faculty at Yale University. I am particularly indebted to Professor Kirk Wetters for his invaluable advice throughout the writing process. I would also like to thank Professors Rüdiger Campe, Katrin Truestedt, Thomas Khurana, and Paul North for providing me with helpful discussions on matters related to aesthetics, history of philosophy, and theories of comedy. Chapters 3.1 and 3.2 had been presented at two separate colloquia at Yale and the University of Tel Aviv; I am grateful to audiences at both institutions for their generous feedback. There were times when I nearly lost faith in this project: without the tips and affirmation that I received from my esteemed friend and colleague, Tobias Kühne, this text would most certainly not have come to fruition. Last but not least, I would like to thank my fiancé, Estella Barbosa de Souza, whose unwavering support and unfailing patience helped me overcome numerous obstacles to finish this work. The following text is dedicated to her.
ABBREVIATIONS

**Texts by Agamben**


**Texts by Heidegger**


**Texts by Kant**


**Texts by Nietzsche**


**Texts by Rancière**


**Texts by Schiller**


In 1826, what was thought at the time to be the skeletal remains of Friedrich Schiller was disinterred from the Kassengewölbе in Weimar. The excavation process was not a smooth one: the vault was in a state of disrepair and Schiller’s casket had burst open. Since the poet’s body could not be identified among the bones crammed inside the ancient crypt, the excavators decided to transport the bones to a less chaotic setting. Over the course of three nights, a total of 23 skulls were extracted from the Kassengewölbе and placed inside the office of the town mayor where they were carefully scrutinized and measured against the dimensions of the poet’s death mask. Numerous experts came by to help identify the skull. A number of Schiller’s former acquaintances – amongst them his servant, Rudolf – were brought in for consultation. After a few days of discussion, there was a clear consensus: the largest of the 23 skulls was recognized as the skull of Friedrich Schiller for it alone corresponded to the death mask’s extraordinary dimensions. Schiller’s skeleton was soon assembled from matching bone pieces found inside the crypt. It was re-interred about a year later, with much pomp and circumstance, in the Weimarer Fürstengruft. The casket continues to reside there up to this day, next to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s, surrounded by distinguished members of the House of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach.

Except, of course, the skeleton was not Schiller’s. In 2008, over two centuries after the poet’s death, DNA tests conducted by a team of medical experts funded by the Klassik Stiftung Weimar conclusively proved that the bones dug up in 1826 could not have been
Schiller’s since they do not match the genetic codes found in the remains of his immediate descendants. And to make matters even more confusing, there was another set of bones identified by medical experts as the skeleton of Friedrich Schiller: this second set of bones was excavated from the Kassengewölbe in 1911 under the supervision of the renowned German anatomist, August von Froriep. It, too, was revealed by DNA tests to contain no trace of Schiller’s genes. In fact, it turned out that both skeletons identified as “Friedrich Schiller” were assembled from the bones of six different individuals, none of whom were related to the poet. Not only were these skeletons assembled from the wrong bones, their unities as ‘skeletons’ turned out to be fictions as well.

Where Schiller’s remains are today, we do not know. None of the bones inside the Kassengewölbe contains the poet’s DNA.¹ The only thing we know for certain is that, for the past two centuries, admirers and detractors of Schiller alike have been looking at the wrong bones. Schiller today is missing. The casket on display is empty.

II.

Who exactly is “Friedrich Schiller”? What are we referring to when we utter this name? The name “Friedrich Schiller” rarely conjures a stable image. Whether one views him as a poet or a dramatist, as a historian or a philosopher, the entity known as “Friedrich Schiller” is more often than not a contested space. Was he primarily a writer of fiction or a thinker? Is his verse dramatically effective and therefore elegant, or simply loud and verbose? Are

¹ For more on the excavations and DNA testing of Schiller’s remains, see Walter Hinderer’s Schiller und kein Ende: Metamorphosen und kreative Aneignungen (2009). A shortened version of the text is available in English in “Where is This Schiller Now?” (2011).
his plays examples of bourgeois illusion-based theater, or do they point towards Brecht? Are his theoretical writings primarily of historical interest, or are they still philosophically relevant for theorists today?

The history of Schiller reception is a history of many contradictions. Schiller was just as often praised as he was despised. He was also often monumentalized and used as a symbol for something he did not stand for. The young Schiller was adored by the Jacobins. But was he as politically radical as they thought? Goethe and Schiller are often paired as poets of the Weimarer Klassik. Yet how much common ground did they really share? The German Romantics generally held a dim view of Schiller’s poetry. Famously, the Schlegels burst into laughter after reading Das Lied von der Glocke. But Hegel regarded Schiller as an important thinker, giving the poet-thinker a prominent place in his lectures on aesthetics. Schopenhauer and Kuno Fischer also held Schiller in high regard. Büchner and Engels, however, criticized his dramas as idealized abstractions with little connection to reality. Nietzsche called him “der Moral-Trompeter von Säckingen.”

In the twentieth century, Schiller reception tended to crystallize into two polarizing images. On the one hand, he was often regarded as a “good humanist,” that is, an important poet-thinker who paved the way towards modernity with his vision of a non-oppressive society achieved through aesthetic education. On the other hand, he was also criticized as a “bad ideologist,” that is, as a dangerous thinker whose totalizing vision of society helped

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made fascism possible and whose valorization of art encouraged bourgeois political apathy. Which of these is the more accurate representation?

The “good humanist” image emerged in the post-war period as a reaction against Schiller’s misappropriation under the hands of the Nazis. Instead of reducing Schiller’s vast oeuvre into a set of fixed values and ideas, post-war philologists such as Gerhard Storz (1959), Benno von Wiese (1959), and Helmut Koopmann (1966) strived to paint a more complex picture of Schiller, one that was constantly in flux, yet unified. As von Wiese puts it: “In allen Phasen seines Lebens war Schiller stets der gleiche, jedoch auf einer immer verwandelten Stufe” (vii). Schiller, in other words, is not to be viewed as espousing a specific moral or political program. His dramas, poetry, and theoretical writings are to be viewed in light of one another, as expressions of a mind that is constantly developing, constantly trying to capture the modern condition in new ways.³

The “good humanist” image, however, is not limited to Germanists. Philosophers such as Herbert Marcuse, Eugen Fink, and Hans-Georg Gadamer all found inspiration in Schiller’s theoretical writings. Marcuse synthesized Schiller’s notion of play with Marx’s concept of surplus labor and Freud’s analysis of civilization as a libidinal economy in Eros and Civilization (1955) to argue that progress towards a non-repressive society is possible. Fink explored the metaphysics of play in Spiel als Weltsymbol (1960), linking Schillerian

³ Despite arguing that Schiller’s theoretical writings were mere preparations for his poetry, Storz insists that Schiller is philosophically still relevant today:

and Heideggerian concepts in new and unexpected ways. In *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), Gadamer argues against Schiller’s separation of aesthetic experience from the realm of the real, but nevertheless affirms aesthetic experience in the guise of ‘hermeneutics’ as the site of a reaffirmation of human identity. Thus, despite criticizing Schiller’s metaphysics of art, Gadamer still affirms the project of aesthetic humanism. And that, indeed, is what Marcuse, Fink, and Gadamer have in common. They all affirm Schiller as a thinker. They believe that society can become better, that humanity can improve, and that the catastrophes of the early twentieth century have not invalidated our need to reenchant the world through play.

This line of thought is precisely what skeptics attack as naïve ideology. It is what unites Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Paul de Man, and Terry Eagleton as critics of Schiller. In *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944), Adorno and Horkheimer more or less equates the reconciling principle of aesthetic humanism with the commodification of art by the culture industry. Although Adorno would go on to affirm aesthetic experience as having critical potential, the Schillerian conception of art as ‘harmonious’ is ridiculed as a typical bourgeois illusion. De Man’s reading of Schiller is even more damning. He attacks aesthetic humanism for valorizing the aesthetic “as an exemplary category, as a unifying category, as a model for education, as a model even for the state” (*Aesthetic Ideology* 130). In de Man’s narrative, Schiller is a non-philosopher who violently misreads Kant, turning critical philosophy into an ideology that valorizes unity and closure.\(^4\) De Man even goes

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\(^4\) There are many problems with de Man’s narrative. Not only does it misrepresent Schiller’s philosophical credentials and position, it also evinces a very weak understanding of Kant. As the philosopher Frederick Beiser (2005) rightly points out: “De Man distinguished the poet Schiller from the philosopher Kant on the grounds that Schiller is more metaphysical than Kant, Kant more critical than Schiller. Where Kant warns us about making inferences to the existence of the noumenal or intellectual world, Schiller, led astray by his imagination, assumes the existence of
so far as to suggest that Schiller was partially responsible for Goebbels (154f). Although de Man’s narrative is extremely misleading,\(^5\) it is very influential in anglophone academia. Compared to de Man, Eagleton’s view of Schiller is less one-sided. In The Ideology of the Aesthetic (1990), he praises Schiller for seeing in the aesthetic the promise of “a free, equal community of independent subject” (27). Like de Man, however, Eagleton accuses Schiller of propagating an ideology that replaces coercion with consent, or open domination with concealed domination, which is what allows bourgeois hegemony to take place (20). Thus, Adorno, Horkheimer, de Man, and Eagleton are unified in their negative assessment of Schillerian ideology. As Henrik Sponsel describes it: “Friedrich Schiller – unkritischer Spätaufklärer, blinder Idealist und gefährlicher Ästhetiker. Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Paul de Man und Terry Eagleton ankern ihre Kritik am Klassiker Schiller in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts an diese stereotype Negativetikettierung” (383).

Two images of Schiller. Good humanist versus bad ideologist. Which is the right one? That was the main Schiller debate of the post-war period. Thankfully, we have moved such a world. But the contrast here is bogus: on a strictly practical basis, Kant himself does permit inferences to the existence of the noumenal world; Schiller makes his inferences on the same basis, observing the same regulative restrictions as Kant” (267). It is ironic that in “Kant and Schiller” (Aesthetic Ideology 129-162), de Man sneers at Schiller for being fascinated with the ‘practical’ and not grasping Kant’s ‘theoretical’ standpoint. In fact, it is de Man who is confused: he underestimates how crucial Kant’s practical philosophy is to his philosophical system. De Man’s reading of Kant, moreover, is based on crude generalizations (“the beautiful is a metaphysical and ideological principle, the sublime aspires to being a transcendental one”) (73) and wishful thinking (“in the case of the dynamic sublime, one could speak of a shift from trope to performance”) (89).

\(^5\) Almost every Schiller scholar rejects de Man’s reading. See, for example, Stanley Corngold’s “Potential Violence in de Man” (1989), Karen Feldman’s “De Man’s Kant and Goebbels’ Schiller: The Ideology of Reception” (2009), and Henrik Sponsel’s “Was sagte dieser Schiller (damals)?” (2011). German Schiller scholars have for the most part wisely ignored de Man’s reading, mentioning it only in footnotes, if at all. De Man’s reading of Schiller is discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.2.
beyond such simple binarism. Since the 1990s, and especially after the *Jubiläumsjahr* of 2005, Schiller scholarship has grown in both quality and quantity. Scholars are no longer interested in simplistic characterizations of Schiller as a good humanist or a bad ideologist. There is a new trend in Schiller scholarship. The editors of *Who is this Schiller now?* (2011) describe it as follows:

In accordance with important Schiller scholarship of the second half of the twentieth century and in particular in the most recent decade, but in stark contrast to the common convictions of the generally less well-read, no trace is left of Schiller the lopsidedly abstract idealist who turned back on politics. That widespread yet demonstrably ignorant fashionable view, commonly espoused from the late 1950s through the 1980s, has been rejected as a scholarly aberration imposed by a combination of the intrusion of German history and a plethora of competing ‘politically correct’ agendas, the latter concept itself already grown heavy with its own antique 1980s dustiness. The essays presented here, by senior and junior Schiller scholars alike, emphasize and document instead Schiller the cosmopolitan realist…

In other words: Schiller is not to be regarded as a naïve ‘idealist’ who embraces the reconciling principles of the beautiful. He is to be regarded as a thinker of the sublime whose epistemologically skeptical view of history is better characterized as ‘realist.’ It is hard to pin point when exactly this new trend of Schiller scholarship came about, but there are now several books affirming Schiller as a modernist thinker of the sublime. To mention just a few examples, Oellers’s *Friedrich Schiller: Zur Modernität eines Klassikers* (Oellers
1996), Alt’s magisterial two-volume biography, *Schiller: Leben – Werk – Zeit* (2000), Riedel’s article “‘Weltgeschichte ein erhabenes Objekt’: Zur Modernität von Schillers Geschichtsdenken” (2002), and Awe’s *Das Erhabene in Schillers Essays zur Ästhetik* (2012) all emphasize Schiller’s modernity and the aesthetic category of the sublime. Of course, not every recent Schiller scholar fits this trend. Pugh (1996) argues that Schiller is best regarded as a Platonist, not a modernist. Beiser (2005), meanwhile, argues that Schiller is primarily concerned with the regulative idea of the beautiful, not the sublime. In the German-speaking world, however, the dominant image of Schiller is currently that of a “Vorläufer einer selbstkritischen Moderne, die um Aporien einer Versöhnungsästhetik weiß und der es darum geht, die Widersprüche der modernen Welt auszuhalten” (*Schiller-Handbuch* 580). Even non-Germanists are starting to view Schiller from this perspective. Joshua Billings’ *Genealogy of the Tragic: Greek Tragedy and German Philosophy* (2015) is a good recent example: “Schiller sees history as governed by a tragic law, which renders all attempts at rationalization impotent,” the author writes, in a vein that fits well with recent German scholarship, “In the tragic and historical sublime, though, we learn to perceive chaos as order, preparing ourselves to turn the work of necessity into the work of freedom. This makes the tragic sublime – and not the beautiful – the conclusion to Schiller’s project of aesthetics” (97).

It appears that we have found a new image of Schiller, one that is more nuanced and less clichéd than those found in the past. We have replaced the old skeletons, the good humanist and the bad ideologist, with a new one, the modernist thinker of the sublime. The experts have assembled and verified a new *Schiller-Bild* for our times, and all the scholars
are happy. But what if this skeleton, too, is an illusion? What if these new bones are just as fictitious as the previous ones? Again, we disturb Schiller’s grave to fill the casket. Why?

III.

Before Schiller’s putative ‘skull’ was reinterred at the Weimarer Fürstengruft in 1827, it found its way to the Frauenplan residence of a certain Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Goethe wanted to keep the skull of his friend inside a glass case on a blue velvet cushion in his study. We do not know the exact reasons why. According to Wilhelm von Humboldt, however, Goethe made it clear that he wanted the location of the skull be kept a secret.6 The so-called ‘Schiller skull’ remained in Goethe’s possession for several months and may have inspired him to write a poem in terza rima that was posthumously given the title of “Bei Betrachtung von Schillers Schädel.” In Goethe’s lifetime, the poem had no name. Yet Goethe must have found it important, for he placed it at the very end of Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre, as if to conclude a non-concludable novel. It opens with the following lines:

Im ernsten Beinhaus war’s, wo ich beschaute,

Wie Schädel Schädeln angeordnet paßten;

Die alte Zeit gedacht ich, die ergraute.

The poem proceeds in a relatively straightforward fashion. After musing on transience and mortality, the speaker goes on to describe how the bones, apparently carried by the speaker, will now be forced out of their peaceful rest and into daylight (“Nicht Ruh im Grabe ließ man euch, vertrieben / Seid ihr herauf zum lichten Tage wieder”). The speaker then goes

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6 See Humboldt’s letter to his wife on December 29, 1826.
on to exclaim how these bones seem to contain an esoteric message ("Doch mir Adepten war die Schrift geschrieben, / Die heil'gen Sinn nicht jedem offenbarte,"), and how their delightful, enigmatic forms are like traces of the divine ("Wie mich geheimnisvoll die Form entzückte! / Die gottgedachte Spur, die sich erhalten!"). After some effusive apostrophes – the skull is described as an oracular vessel ("Geheim Gefäß! Orakelsprüche spendend, / Wie bin ich wert, dich in der Hand zu halten?") – the poem ends with a question that may or may not be rhetorical, and a chiasmus that may or may not summarize the poem:

Was kann der Mensch im Leben mehr gewinnen,

Als daß sich Gott-Natur ihm offenbare?

Wie sie das Feste läßt zu Geist verrinnen,

Wie sie das Geisterzeugte fest bewahre.

Schiller’s name is not mentioned once. So what does this poem have to do with Schiller?

Traditionally, this poem is interpreted as a celebration of “the mysteries of nature’s organization.”⁷ According to the traditional interpretation, the skull in the poem is a symbol of nature qua phenomena, while the ‘divine message’ revealed to the speaker represents the ‘idea’ of nature’s purpose or totality – an idea which cannot be represented in language, but can only be gestured at through linguistic figures. If this reading is correct, then the poem could be classified as an expression of a ‘Schillerian worldview.’ That would explain why Goethe chooses to use Schiller’s skull as the poem’s subject. The reading, however, is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. First, it is not clear why Goethe would want to end an unconventional novel like Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre with such a conventional

⁷ See Karl Viëtor, “Goethes Gedicht auf Schillers Schädel,” PMLA 59 (1944)
philosophical message. Second, the reading ignores how the speaker disturbs the dead (“Nicht Ruh im Grabe ließ man euch…”) and may be an ethically less-than-ideal figure. Third, there is a general lack of textual evidence to back up the claim that the bones in the poem are supposed to represent nature qua phenomena (nothing in the poem suggests that this is the allegorical meaning of the bones). Finally, when read as a mouthpiece for Naturphilosophie, the poem is just not very interesting: it seems odd that a great poet such as Goethe would write something so conventional and place it at the end of his novel.

Fortunately, this traditional reading of the poem is no longer in fashion. Today, we have an alternative reading by Marc Redfield. In Phantom Formations (1996), Redfield argues that Goethe’s terza rima piece is essentially about language. The bones and skulls in the poem do not stand in for nature qua phenomena, he says, but for the nonphenomenal material condition of language, i.e. language regarded as a world-structuring inscription. “For what the ‘I’ beholds in the poem’s opening lines,” Redfield writes, is not precisely bones per se, but a grammar of bones: “…ich beschauete, / Wie Schädel Schädeln angeordnet paßten.” The “I” here transforms into a perception the unperceivable differences that make language possible, summarized here in the untranslatable “passen” of skull with skull: the difference to be “seen” is the minimal mark of the dative, the “n” that differentiates “Schädel” from “Schädeln,” organizing a potential stutter into a grammatical structure. (132)

In Redfield’s skeptical reading of the poem, the speaker is “an enthusiast, a Schwärmer, whose hunger for spiritual election forces a suspiciously abrupt revelation at the end of the
fifth stanza” (131). When the speaker apostrophizes the bones, she is “granting meaning to fragments, joins, and body parts, transforming the nonphenomenality of difference, the metonymy of skull-on-skull, into the ‘gray time’ of metaphor” (132). This act of granting meaning through metaphors is a potentially violent act, for it at once effaces and reiterates “the uncertainty that makes possible all systems of articulation” (132). Since the bones are supposed to figure this uncertainty and “represent the very condition of being zerstreut, scattered or distracted, turned elsewhere,” Redfield says that they should not be mistaken for a skeleton (133). The bones are “the condition for skeletons, but are not skeletons; they are the frame, the Gestell, that makes the organic body possible, but […] are themselves meaningless, without pathos or interiority” (132). The bones, in short, stand for the material inscription that frames meaning, the non-signifying rupture making signification possible.

Now, it is natural to assume here that Goethe’s poem is also made up of bones since as a piece of text it is a string of joints and articulations. It follows from this that as careful readers we ought to not mistake the poem’s scattered bones for a skeleton. If we read Goethe’s poem as a text with a fixed philosophical message, we are forcing the bones into a fixed formation and thus effacing its materiality. This would be a violent way of reading. Following de Man, Redfield calls this process of formalization, this mistaking of unstable linguistic figures (bones) for a stable natural phenomenon (skeleton), “aestheticization.” He argues that Goethe’s poem casts suspicion on the process of aestheticization by depicting the speaker as an untrustworthy reader of bones, a disturber of the dead’s resting place. Goethe’s poem, according to Redfield’s reading, invites us to reflect on the process
of reading, on our engagement with language, and on the potential violence involved in such encounters.

This is where Schiller enters the picture. Redfield follows de Man in regarding Schiller as the person most responsible for valorizing the aesthetic and popularizing it as an ideology. According to him, Schiller’s seminal text, Über die Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen (henceforth: Ästhetische Briefe), helped propagate the illusory idea that meaning and phenomena (i.e. the intellectual and the sensuous) could be brought together via ‘aesthetic experience’ and that this experience should therefore be taken as an ideal for modern society to strive after (Phantom Formations, viii-ix). Because Goethe’s poem shows us how aesthetic experience is illusory and violent, it is in effect a critique of aesthetic ideology. Like the novel Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre as a whole, Goethe’s poem problematizes the belief that texts are harmoniously unified as a Schwärmerei that violently imposes meaning on the text’s material condition. If this reading is correct, then Schiller is not a subject of praise in this poem, but a subject of critique and parody. Instead of expressing a Schillerian worldview, the poem reveals this worldview to be intellectually clumsy and worthy of suspicion.

Is this a good reading of Goethe’s poem and its relation to Schiller? Perhaps. But there is something paradoxical about the way Redfield interprets the poem and the way he interprets Schiller. Redfield describes Schiller as if he were a fixed emblem, i.e. a stable body of meaning or a tropological system with a univocal message. Yet Redfield himself says Goethe’s poem is about Schiller’s bones. Surely, if the excavation of the bones in the poem, which parallels what was happening at the time to Schiller’s physical remains, is
indeed meant to allegorize the act of reading, then one of the first ‘text’ that the poem suggests we should not violate has to be the figure of ‘Friedrich Schiller’ himself. After all, it is Schiller’s remains that is violated by the speaker’s Schwärmerei. Schiller here is the object and not the subject of bad reading, the victim and not the perpetrator of aesthetic violence. If the skull in the poem is supposed to be Schiller’s skull, then the poem is first and foremost warning us how not to read Schiller. But what does Redfield do? He reads Schiller violently, as a fixed skeleton, not as scattered bones. To his credit, Redfield is aware that something paradoxical is going on when one tries to read Schiller as a fixed emblem of aesthetic ideology.\footnote{In The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism (2003), Redfield writes that “if Schiller anthropomorphizes the aesthetic, de Man anthropomorphizes the source of its error” (99). The suggestion here is that de Man ‘ironically’ anthropomorphizes (i.e. aestheticizes) Schiller’s text in order to reveal the violence inherent in Schiller’s ideology – and this ‘irony’ justifies his violence against Schiller. I will have more to say about this irony in the following section. For now, it suffices to point out that Redfield’s logic is viciously circular: violence is used to associate Schiller with violence, and this association is in turn used to justify the original violence that constructed the association of Schiller with violence in the first place.} His awareness, however, does not prevent him from aestheticizing Schiller; on the contrary, Redfield relies heavily on using “Schiller” as a tool for critiquing what he calls “aesthetic ideology.” He repeats, in short, what the speaker of Goethe’s poem does: he forces meaning on Schiller’s scattered bones, violently disturbing their resting grounds. But it is not just Redfield who does this. All the Schiller scholars piously reconstructing a new image of the author are in effect grave robbers as well.

IV.

In the past two centuries, many Schillers have come and go, talking of beautiful Juno. Yet they are fully-formed and neatly labelled, not bones, but skeletons. In the following work,
we will approach Schiller’s texts as bones, not skeletons. Rather than attempt to construct another unified body of beliefs that purport to represent Schiller and his thoughts, we will read Schiller in conjunction with two interlocutors so as to produce a network of ideas that crisscross various texts, authors, and time periods, producing an *explosoante-fixe* that is not consistent with any one idea of Schiller, and yet is recognizable as Schiller all the same.

As the title of this work suggests, we will focus primarily on Schiller’s theoretical texts, especially those having to do with aesthetics and politics. Schiller is in many ways an aesthetic humanist. However, it would be a mistake to assume that we are dealing with a single identity. As we shall see, aesthetic humanism is not a stable body of thought. It is a set of operations, a constellation of thought patterns that we shall be calling “Schillerian paradigms.” Schiller the aesthetic humanist is an unstable figure: polyvocal rather than univocal, scattered bones, not skeletons. To grasp this multi-figure, we must disarticulate the border that divides ‘Schiller’ from ‘non-Schiller.’ What we seek is not a figure but a landscape of possibilities. Aesthetic humanism is not a body. It is a spectral potential.

In what follows, we will read Schiller through the writings of Jacques Rancière and Giorgio Agamben. We will use Rancière and Agamben to amplify Schillerian concepts, so that what might strike one as vague or unclear in Schiller’s text could manifest itself more distinctly in the context of contemporary theory. But the traffic goes both ways. By placing Rancière and Agamben in the context of Schiller, the limits of Rancière’s and Agamben’s paradigms.

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*I use the term ‘paradigm’ to emphasize the fact that we are not talking about concepts (paradigms are not categories with instances that fall under its boundary). But the term has to be qualified because ‘paradigm’ suggests exemplarity and could be mistaken for something that we desire to imitate. That is not necessarily what is at stake in the Schillerian paradigms that we will be discussing. Schillerian paradigms are ideas in the Kantian sense: they have no content, but they indicate a logical limit of something essential to rationality.*
theories can also be revealed. Ultimately, the borders separating Schiller, Rancière, and Agamben will be blurred, not in an obfuscating, but in a productive and clarifying manner. Why Rancière and Agamben? Because they explore the two poles of Schillerian aesthetics. Rancière’s reflections on aesthetic experience is in many ways an extension of Schiller’s thoughts on the paradigm of the aesthetic condition (”ästhetischer Zustand”). Agamben’s interest in the humanity-to-come mirrors Schiller’s interest in the paradigm of the aesthetic human (“ästhetischer Mensch”). There are many echoes and resonance to be found in the texts of these three authors. By bringing them together and putting them in conversation, we may experience their reverberations in new and unexpected ways.

But before we begin to examine how Rancière and Agamben extend Schiller’s aesthetic humanist project, we must first dispel a number of myths and untruths that prevent us from reading Schiller with open eyes. As such, our investigation of aesthetic humanism is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 is devoted to demythologizing Schiller. We have seen how the secondary literature construct images of Schiller that are too well-formed, neglecting its spectral potential. In the next section, we will take a closer look at De Man’s reading of Schiller and use it to debunk myths that scholars falsely associate with aesthetic humanism. Chapter 2 is devoted to the paradigm of the aesthetic condition. By reading Schiller through the lens of Rancière, we will see that the aesthetic condition is not a mental or psychological state, but an operation of thought that can be used to dispel any binary oppositions or hierarchical ordering, with implications that are varied, yet always political. Chapter 3 is devoted to the paradigm of the aesthetic human. It argues that what is at stake in the idea of the aesthetic human is not a simple unification of the drives but a deactivation
of an ontological apparatus that Aristotle began and that continues to haunt philosophy today. To this end, we will examine Agamben’s thoughts on the human/animal distinction, form-of-life, and the coming community, and juxtapose them to what Schiller has to say about the human, play, and community. We will also see how the paradigm of the aesthetic state (“ästhetischer Staat”) points us to beyond Rancière and Agamben, demanding from us political action, where Rancière and Agamben do not.

By the end of this study, the reader will no longer have a stable image of Schiller. What will emerge instead is a network of contradictory thought patterns, some leading towards play, others leading towards work; some leading towards sense redistribution, others leading towards value commitment; some leading towards contemplation, others leading towards action; some pointing towards Rancière and Agamben, others pointing away from them. This multivocal complexity is the only way to do justice to Schiller’s texts. For Schiller is not an ideologue of the aesthetic. Nor is he a classical humanist or a modernist thinker of the sublime. Schiller is a node of thought that points us in multiple directions. He is a true thinker of the aesthetic, and the aesthetic is an operation that cannot be contained within a single stable framework. The aesthetic leaps from art to ethics and politics, and within each domain, it produces different valences of thought and values. Aesthetic humanism is not a project. It is a landscape of ethical and political possibilities. To rethink aesthetic humanism is not to reconstruct yet another image of Friedrich Schiller. It is to behold Friedrich Schiller, not as a unified body, but as a spectral potential.
Chapter 1.2 – Aesthetic Ideology

I.

It is impossible to read Schiller in the United States today with clear eyes. This is because, more than twenty years after his death, Paul de Man still casts a long shadow over literary criticism at elite American universities. De Man’s students, amongst them Marc Redfield, Andrzej Warminski, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, continue to hold academic positions at top literature departments across the states. Before we can reconsider Schiller anew, we must first dismantle the image of Schiller they circulate. Otherwise, Schillerian terms such as ‘aesthetic education,’ ‘play,’ and ‘the human’ will be misunderstood from the outset.

Let us begin with de Man. Schiller according to de Man is an aesthetic ideologist. What does that mean? The term ‘aesthetic’ as used by de Man is not difficult to grasp. For de Man, the ‘aesthetic’ means the impossible, that is, the illusory synthesis of signified and signifier. It refers to the false coming together of the sensuous and the intellectual, the phenomenal taken as the ‘expression’ of an idea. We have already seen in the previous section how the ‘aesthetic’ is a problematic category for Redfield. Redfield questions traditional readings of “Bei Betrachtung von Schillers Schädel” for ‘aestheticizing’ of Goethe’s text. According to de Man and Redfield, aestheticization occurs when symbolic representation is taken for granted as stable and successful, so that the text appears as an autonomous system of signs rather than as a material inscription that frames meaning. De Man sometimes calls this process of aestheticization “the phenomenalization of the sign” (Aesthetic Ideology 111). It is not accidental that de Man makes heavy use of semiotic vocabulary to define the aesthetic. Language for de Man is understood as comprising an
unbridgeable disjunction between “a generative, open-ended, non-referential grammatical system” and “a figural system closed off by a transcendental signification that subverts the grammatical code to which the text owes its existence” (Allegories of Reading 270). To him, the ‘aesthetic’ is an inherently semiotic concept because it asserts, naively and falsely, the possibility of bridging this unbridgeable gap.

But what has the ‘aesthetic’ to do with ideology? De Man writes in The Resistance to Theory that: “What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism” (11). Again, this is a semiotic definition: it transplants the Marxian notion of ‘ideology’ onto the plane of linguistic discourse. The definition makes clear how ‘ideology’ and the ‘aesthetic’ are intertwined: whereas ideology is the confusion of reference with phenomena, the aesthetic is the positing of the possibility of phenomena and reference corresponding to one another. Since one can hardly confuse reference with phenomena without first positing their coming together, ideology needs the aesthetic. As de Man remarks: “One can see why any ideology would always have a vested interest in theories of language advocating correspondence between sign and meaning, since they depend on the illusion of this correspondence for their effectiveness” (The Rhetoric of Romanticism 170). To have an ideology, one must ascribe fixed ideas onto the sensuous-material, and to ascribe fixed ideas on the sensuous-material, aestheticization has to occur. Hence all ideologies are necessarily aesthetic. The aesthetic produces ideology.

Although de Man would never put it in such terms, there is in fact a master narrative at work here. De Man’s definition of the aesthetic relies on an implicit account of language that posits a permanent gap between reference and phenomena. Hence Eagleton writes in
The Ideology of the Aesthetic (1991): “For the essentially tragic philosophy of [Paul] de Man, mind and world, language and being, are eternally discrepant, and ideology is the gesture which seeks to conflate these quite separate orders, hunting nostalgically for a pure presence of the thing within the word, and so imbuing meaning with all the sensuous positivity of natural being” (199). De Man’s critique of ideology is essentially a form of linguistic skepticism grounded on a specific theory of language (even if it claims that no understanding of language is possible, that claim, too, entails a knowledge of language). We have seen how Redfield’s reading of Goethe’s poem relies on concepts such as ‘frame,’ ‘materiality,’ and ‘inscription.’ These concepts presuppose a certain way of looking at language, an implicit understanding of what reference is or isn’t.

Now, Schiller plays an exceptionally important role in de Man’s critique of the aesthetic, for Schiller is not regarded as just one aesthetic ideologist amongst many, but as the very paradigm of ideological thinking. Schiller, according to de Man’s narrative, is a figure who haunts us. “Don’t decide too soon that you are beyond Schiller in any sense,” de Man warns his students in one of his lectures, “I don’t think any of us can lay this claim” (Aesthetic Ideology 142). The pedagogical message here is clear. Schiller’s mistakes are ours. What he does is what we do. But we need not be like him. We can learn from him. We have the potential to overcome our Schillerian selves.

II.

The narrative de Man constructs around the figure of ‘Schiller’ is inextricably tied to his narrative on ‘Kant.’ To understand his Schiller, it is necessary to understand his Kant.
According to de Man, Kant is a philosopher whose excess of rigor led him to “undo” the aesthetic as a valid category (Aesthetic Ideology 89). This undoing of the aesthetic occurs in the Third Critique’s troubled ‘transition’ between the articulation of the mathematical sublime and that of the dynamic sublime, for it is here that Kant’s language shifts from “the pseudocognition of tropes” to “the activity of performance” (79). In de Man’s reading, the articulation of the mathematical sublime takes place within a purely formal tropological system, i.e. within a closed system of discourse that does not refer to something outside of itself, for what it describes is a discourse procedure in which apprehension (apprehension) and comprehension (comprehension aesthetica) establishes its part-whole relation. The idea here is simple to enough: whereas apprehension proceeds successively (for example, when one’s field of vision moves from the bottom to the top of a skyscraper), comprehension is the attempt to create “a paradigmatic totalization of the apprehended trajectory” (77), an attempt that has its limits since it can only process a finite magnitude (if the skyscraper is sufficiently large, comprehension can no longer establish its size in relation to other objects). At the limit of comprehension, then, the synthesized ‘whole’ that comprehension produces ends up being a mere ‘part’ to another whole, one that is not comprehended. The ‘mathematical sublime’ is an articulation of this limit: going against Kant’s own words (not to mention all respectable Kant scholarship), de Man asserts that the mathematical sublime “describes not a faculty of the mind, be it as consciousness or as cognition, but a potentiality inherent in language” (78). The mathematical sublime thus does not refer to anything outside of its own formal system: it merely articulates the limit of its system without implying content.
And yet, somehow, this system is incomplete. The articulation of the mathematical sublime, de Man says, cannot be “closed off” in a “satisfactory manner” and requires another chapter on “the dynamics of the sublime” (78). (De Man here seems to equate the “dynamics of the sublime” with the “dynamic sublime.”) But de Man also claims that Kant’s articulation of the dynamic sublime is “conspicuously” lacking in justification in the overall context of the Third Critique (79). According to his reading, the unexplained caesura between the mathematical and the dynamic sublime should be read as the mark of “the saturation of the tropological field as language frees itself of its constraints and discovers within itself a power no longer dependent on the restrictions of cognition” (79). In other words, whereas the mathematical sublime corresponds to language qua tropological system (i.e. language as a system of cognition or signification), the dynamic sublime corresponds to language qua performance (language as force or power). “One thinks of the dynamic sublime as a kind of residue after the tropological discourse has tried to saturate the field,” writes de Man (137). If this reading is right, then the sublime here has nothing to do with aesthetic experience but is instead concerned with language’s double modality and the (unbridgeable) gap between them.

10 De Man once again contradicts the vast majority of Kant scholarship and reveals himself here to have a limited understanding of Kant’s philosophical system. He appears to be unaware that in the Transcendental Analytic (in the First Critique) Kant describes the first six categories (or pure concepts of the understanding) as “mathematical,” and the latter six as “dynamic,” since the first six are “concerned with objects of intuition,” while the latter six are concerned with “the existence of these objects, in their relation to each other or the understanding” (KrV, A162/B202). The architectonic of the Kantian system requires the “mathematical” and the “dynamic” to be paired together as the meta-categories of judgment. De Man’s assertion that the passage on the dynamic sublime is “lacking in justification” is itself, ironically enough, lacking in justification.
To justify this highly unorthodox reading of the dynamic sublime, de Man provides the reader with an equally unorthodox interpretation of section 29 of the Third Critique. This is the passage where Kant describes how an ocean is dynamically sublime if and only if we regard it “as poets do” [wie die Dichter es tun] (80). De Man paraphrases this as a way of looking at the ocean “as an architectonic construct [...] its horizontal expanse is like a floor bounded by the horizon, by the walls of heaven as they close off and delimit the building” (81). The ocean is sublime when it is viewed as an open space without meaning or purpose. The term that de Man uses to describe this sublime way of viewing the ocean surface is “material vision” since the ocean surface here is “purely formal, devoid of any semantic depth and reducible to the formal mathematization or geometrization of pure optics” (82-3). (Recall the “bones” in Goethe’s poem, which Redfield reads as a material inscription that frames meaning but is itself devoid of one.) De Man thinks that this material vision “stands in direct contradiction to all preceding definitions and analyses of the sublime given in section 24 on until this point in section 29” (83). Evidently, the text stretching from section 24 to the description of the ocean surface in section 29 are little more than a string of red-herrings: the dynamic sublime is all about Kant’s material vision of the ocean surface. In fact, the text following this material vision is equally misleading. According to de Man’s reading, Kant’s description of the intricate dialectical play between the mental faculties of the transcendental subject during the judgment of the dynamic sublime is nothing more than an “allegorical tale” (i.e. a tropological construction) that disguises itself as a philosophical argument but which is “in fact determined by linguistic structures that are not within the author’s control” (87). This is convenient, as it means we
do not have to figure out the content of the so-called “allegory” – all we need to do is take note of the fact that Kant places an allegorical piece of text “in close proximity” to a non-allegorical description of the ocean’s sublime surface (87). Kant is forced to place two visions of the sublime – one metaphorical, one material – in an awkward and uneasy juxtaposition to one another because the *rigor* of his philosophy. Since Kant could not logically connect these two visions, he has to resort to parataxis, which brilliantly and unwittingly reveals that there is an unmediable abyss between language *qua* trope (or metaphor) and language *qua* performance (or material condition). This abyss ends up undoing the category of the aesthetic that Kant needs for his philosophical system to close itself off as a system. Through sheer critical rigor, then, Kant destroys the very foundation of his philosophical project. Therein lies his greatness!

Not every reader of Kant, however, appreciates this aspect of Kant’s writing. In fact, de Man laments that up to now philosophers who have read the Third Critique have failed to perceive the “materialism” that is so essential to de Man’s reading of Kant (88-9). Everyone, in other words, has been misreading Kant except him. There is one author in particular, however, that de Man criticizes as the chief culprit for tricking humanity into misreading Kant. This author is none other than Friedrich Schiller. It was Schiller who first tried to “domesticate the critical incisiveness of [Kant]” and turn the aesthetic, which Kant had beautifully undone, into “a unifying category” (130). The tendency to valorize the art that we find in German thinkers – be it Schopenhauer, the early Nietzsche, or Heidegger – is in some ways a consequence of Schiller’s misappropriation of Kant’s critical philosophy (131). De Man even suggests that there has been a long historical back-and-forth between
those who repeats Schiller’s mistake in taking the critical edge off Kant and those who “de-
Schillerizes” their predecessor. Nietzsche, for example, succeeded in “de-Schillerizing”
Schopenhauer to overcome his early aestheticism, but then Heidegger came along and “re-
Schillerized” Nietzsche, so Derrida had to come to the rescue to “de-Schillerize” Heidegger
(and once again reactivate Kant’s critical legacy). Thus, the cycle continues. What Schiller
did to Kant was repeated many times in the history of philosophy, and it will likely repeat
itself again if we do not critically reflect on the problem of the aesthetic. The moral of the
story here is clear. We should not be like Schiller. We should be like Kant: a critical thinker.

III.

But what did Schiller do to Kant? How did he turn the aesthetic into a “unifying” category?
According to De Man, there are several points of departure between Kant’s and Schiller’s
aesthetics. One of them has to do with the relationship between practical and theoretical
reason. Whereas Kant maintained a fine balance between the practical and the theoretical,
Schiller prioritizes the practical over the theoretical. We see this, de Man says, in their
differing conceptions of the sublime. Schiller’s notion of the sublime, as it is introduced in
his 1793 essay “Vom Erhabenen,” is divided into two polarizing categories: the theoretical
sublime, which occurs when nature exceeds our capacity for cognition, and the practical
sublime, which occurs when nature appears to stand in opposition to our desire for self-
preservation. The binary opposition is totalizing and exhaustive, unlike the uncertain
relationship between Kant’s mathematical and dynamic sublime.\footnote{It needs to be stressed: this is de Man’s reading of Kant. The relation between the mathematical
and the dynamic sublime in Kant is not at all ‘uncertain’ as de Man describes. (See Footnote 12)}
Kant’s mathematical
sublime is related to theoretical reason (for it is a failure of representation) and therefore corresponds to Schiller’s theoretical sublime, but Schiller’s practical sublime does not correspond to Kant’s dynamic sublime, for the latter, according the de Man’s reading, is only concerned with the theoretical (Aesthetic Ideology 141). In the analytic of the sublime, de Man says, Kant was dealing “with a strictly philosophical, epistemological problem” (143). The terror that the dynamic sublime generates in Kant’s text is not really a terror, but a Verwunderung, a feeling of shock or surprise which is occasioned by “a failure of representation” and not a threat to self-preservation (139). The sublime for Kant thus has “nothing to do with the pragmata of the relationship between human beings” (143). Schiller fails to understand this. He turns the dynamic sublime into something entirely “empirical, psychological, without any concern for epistemological implications” (143). Schiller, in other words, psychologizes Kant, substituting the empirical for the epistemological. He is a “vulgarizer” of Kant’s critical philosophy. “It’s the difference between a philosopher and Schiller, who is not a philosopher” de Man quips (144).

Fortunately, Schiller improves in the Aesthetic Letters. His conceptual polarity, de Man says, is “much more complex and much richer” in this later work (147). The dynamic between the sense drive (sinnlicher Trieb) and the form drive (Formtrieb) in the Letter XV involves a temporal dimension that was previously lacking in Schiller’s earlier essay. The two drives are logically incompatible: the sense drive gives in to “immediate appeal” of the moment’s singularity; the form drive meanwhile “aspires to a generality” of the absolute or law (147-8). Unfortunately, Schiller wanted to avoid logical incompatibility (and thus genuine dialectic), so he puts the two drives “in a relation of reversible
reciprocity,” but on the level of principle and ideas, not on the level of human existence (149). What allows him to do this is “an empirical concept,” namely, that of the “human,” which de Man says is used as “a principle of closure” in Schiller’s text (150). Synthesis of sense and form into play has to be possible because we are human and that is just a given fact: the concept of “humanity” closes off the system and blinds it from critical discourse. Once again, Schiller resorts to the empirical rather than doing transcendental analysis. Whereas Kant succeeded in disrupting and disarticulating his philosophical system through sheer philosophical rigor, Schiller closes it in a totalizing manner by uncritically positing and affirming the “human.”

“Schiller is not phenomenological, he is empirical,” says de Man (151). His lack of critical rigor precludes him from disclosing the materiality of language. In Kant’s text, there is a point where language shifts “from trope to performance” (89). Schiller’s writing, however, is “trope throughout” (135). That makes his texts easy to understand, hence his philosophy is “more popular” (154). But that is also why it is intellectually contemptible. Schiller’s writing is aesthetic. It does not appeal to critical thought, but merely paints an image of reality. He deserves the title of “aesthetic ideologist” because he naively valorizes the aesthetic, confuses the linguistic with the phenomenal, and vulgarizes of Kant’s critical philosophy. And what we ought to learn from this story can be summarized as follows:

- Kant is a critical thinker. Schiller is an ideologist.
- Critical thinking is good. Ideology is bad.
- Language is open. A synthesis of signifier and signified is impossible.
- Rhetorical analysis is good. Aestheticization is bad.
De Man’s lesson is guided by a series of binary oppositions. These binary oppositions are logically exhaustive and stable. If we take de Man at his word, then this is it. This is the ‘truth’ that de Man is trying to communicate to his students. If the students are attentive, they will have learned much about the difference between Kant’s critical philosophy and Schiller’s vulgar ideas, about the gap between the tropological and the performative uses of language, and about the dangers of uncritically valorizing the aesthetic. It is a complete lesson with a clear philosophical message. Except, of course, for the irony.

IV.

Irony. One cannot avoid it when reading de Man. It alone saves de Man’s lecture from being aestheticized into an ethical program. What de Man says and what is meant by what he says is not one and the same. If the lecture on Kant and Schiller is dripping with irony, it is probably because it was designed to be so. Almost everything that de Man accuses Schiller of doing is staged and repeated in de Man’s rhetorical performance: the binary polarization of Kant and Schiller is totalizing; the projection of a fixed ideological message onto Schiller’s text is aestheticizing; the pedagogical bias towards the critical at the expense of the aesthetic is valorizing; and the constant mocking of Schiller is fueled by non-critical rhetoric which appeals to the listener’s ego (i.e. their desire for intellectual superiority, their illusory belief in their own philosophical competence). But de Man gives us plenty of hints that the surface narrative is not to be taken at face value. When he says that we are all Schillerians, he does not exclude himself. De Man’s invites us to examine the gap between the tropological and the performative uses of language in his own text. If the tropological
system that de Man sets up in his lecture on Kant and Schiller is meant to ‘teach’ us that aesthetic ideology (and non-philosophers such as Schiller) is bad, while critical thinking (and philosophers such as Kant) is good, the fact that this system ends up being so totalizing and valorizing indicates that the text is performing something else. What this ‘something else’ might be is left open to interpretation. We are left with lingering doubts. Can we trust a critique of the aesthetic that is done aesthetically? Can we trust a reading of Kant and Schiller that polarizes them in such a totalizing manner? If critical thinking is indeed antithetical to ideology, why does it fail to ground itself in its own terms and has to appeal to the aesthetic to valorize itself? Can we separate the critical and the aesthetic in such a clear-cut manner? These questions are posed rather than answered by de Man’s lecture.

Irony. One cannot avoid it when reading de Man. Yet critics of de Man tend to miss this aspect of his writing. More worryingly, many of his students are just as oblivious. Two in particular deserve our attention: Redfield and Warminski.

Redfield is relatively nuanced reader of de Man. In The Politics of Aesthetics (2003), he is careful not to set up a simple binary opposition between ‘critical thinking’ and ‘aesthetic ideology’ (as if the two were completely separate categories). Redfield

12 An example of this is Karen Feldman’s article “De Man’s Kant and Goebbels’ Schiller: The Ideology of Reception” (MLN, Vol. 124, No. 5). Feldman rightly points out that de Man’s reading of Schiller is not very de Manian, but she does not view this as a possible a case of self-irony:

De Man’s retrieval of Kant is supposed to interrupt the continuity and homogeneity of ideological reception and thereby restore the riveness of Kant’s critical aesthetics. Is there not something strange, however, about de Man’s insistence on the unbroken continuity and homogeneity of that legacy? Can de Man, the critic of ideology, really find in Schiller an absolutely self-consistent writer, one who could embody ideology with no loose ends, no disruptions? In a strange way de Man does not appear very ‘de Manian’ here in his monolithic equation of aesthetic ideology with Schiller. (1180-1181)
thinks that critical discourse cannot be entirely separated from the aesthetic, for the moment
discourse tries to unmask the aesthetic as ideological, the aesthetic has a way of returning
Redfield writes, “cannot simply be wished or theorized away, for it inheres in the
structures, discourses, and practices of our pedagogical and cultural institutions. Those who
write in opposition to this humanism, furthermore, repeatedly seek critical traction in the
density or self-consciousness of aesthetic texts, and thereby reinstate versions of the
aesthetic distance they deplore” (3). Redfield’s attentive reading of Romantic literature in
the same work demonstrates how the aesthetic can just as easily give rise to critical thought
as critical thought can lead one to aestheticized thinking. The ebb and flow between
aestheticization and critical thinking appears to parallel the intellectual back-and-forth that
de Man mentions between those who ‘Schillerizes’ their predecessors and those who ‘de-
Schillerizes’ them, except this time, the back-and-forth takes place on the level of everyday
discourse and not on the grand stage of intellectual history.

Redfield, however, does not succeed in avoiding all binary polarizations. He is fine
when he reads Romantic literature, but the moment he starts talking about Kant and
Schiller, he resorts to familiar categorizations. He follows de Man’s narrative on Kant and
Schiller almost to the letter, but without the irony, which means that Kant and Schiller are
treated as opposite poles that mutually exclude one another, while Schiller’s
characterization as an ‘empiricist’ is never questioned: “Schiller domesticates Kant’s
critique by reproducing it as idealist empiricism,” he writes matter-of-factly (109).
Redfield’s conception of language is similarly dogmatic: it takes for granted that language
is to be understood as a “trauma of meaning,” i.e. as a tragic separation of meaning from world, of signifier from signified (110). Since Schiller’s aesthetic writings are read as “[producing and policing] a representational concept of language” (110), de Man’s critique of Schiller is affirmed as philosophically valid, while Schiller is more or less treated as philosophically confused. For Redfield, there is no doubt that Schiller misread Kant’s “material vision” and turned it into an “erotic drama” that resulted in “the emergence of an aesthetic and fetishistic ideology: the elaboration of theory’s resistance to itself into a systematic resistance to theory” (124). Even if Redfield admits that “the maneuvers of Schiller’s idealist empiricism are more complex than [de Man’s lecture] ‘Kant and Schiller’ allows for” (119), he still relies on the same set of binaries that de Man uses to ‘teach’ his students how to use language critically. The pedagogical paradigms of ‘Kant’ and ‘Schiller’ remain opposite poles in Redfield’s text, and it is clear that one is favored over the other.

Still, Redfield is restrained compared to Warminski. It is hard to read Warminski’s *Ideology, Rhetoric, Aesthetics* (2013) without feeling forced into a dogmatic conception of language and being beaten with it repeatedly. Warminski’s tone in this text is didactic through and through. He even declares in the preface of his book that his goal is to clarify and expand the project of critiquing ideologies that de Man was “not able to complete” but which he left “hints and indications of paths to follow” (ix). Warminski is certain that he has understood de Man. He believes there is a “path” that de Man wants us to follow – a path which he himself tries to follow. There is no room here for irony. The path is fixed. Warminski wants to enlighten his audience with hard truths. This is especially clear when he talks about Kant and Schiller, whom he is not afraid to polarize as a binary:
Schiller’s ideologization of Kant amounts to his turning the philosophical category of the aesthetic – which, as a category, is something susceptible to ‘critique’ but which is not something one can be for or against – into a value, and a value on which he can found not only an aesthetic anthropology but also an ‘aesthetic state.’ The irony of this (mis-)appropriation of Kant and its properly ideological moment comes in a certain (predictable) reversal: namely, Schiller’s utter lack of philosophical interest in Kant’s critical project and his empiricization, anthropologization, psychologization, indeed humanization, of the Kantian sublime ends up in sheer idealism, the separation of the mind from the body, and a conception of an ‘aesthetic state’ all too cozy for the likes of some later aesthetico-politicians, such as Joseph Goebbels. (8)

Once again, Schiller is associated with the idealization of the aesthetic, gross philosophical incompetence – and Joseph Goebbels. Ironically, all the sins of the aesthetic ideologist are displayed here by Warminski without ironic self-awareness: polarization, valorization, the attribution of fixed meanings to texts, the recourse to non-critical rhetoric, etc.

Despite this dogmatism, Warminski’s reading of Schiller’s texts is not unoriginal. He does not just repeat what de Man has said, but tries to argue in an original manner that, in the Ästhetische Briefe, Schiller “tried to solve the problem of the sublime by recourse to the beautiful” (75). The argument is not entirely convincing, but it is interesting. It centers on a single word, namely, “sublimest” (erhabensten), which is used in Letter XXV of the Ästhetische Briefe in the unfortunate phrase “the possibility of the sublimest humanity” (die Möglichkeit der erhabensten Menschheit). According to Warminski’s reading, the
word “sublimest” here is evidence that Schiller conceives of the sublime in terms of the beautiful, for the sublime, as we know, is fundamentally incommensurable and has no superlatives (75). But the sublime, of course, cannot be conceived in terms of the beautiful: the sublime signals a rupture, a failure of correspondence; the beautiful is the opposite. Yet Schiller has no choice but to cast the sublime in terms of the beautiful because in Letter XV, since he posits that the concept of an undivided and unalienated human nature is a condition of possibility inherent in our experience of the divided, alienated self (71). The problem is this: non-alienation is supposed to be logically possible, yet it is also an ideal that we can only approach asymptotically. This is a contradiction: non-alienation as a task for humanity is a mathematical sublime for it is infinitely distant. But if it is indeed a mathematical sublime, it cannot be comprehended and will never appear to us in intuition. Yet Schiller thinks we have an intuition of non-alienation through aesthetic experience: the ‘beautiful’ is supposed to be a ‘symbol’ for non-alienation. How does Schiller solve this contradiction? By making the sublime an operation of the beautiful: “what is impossible in Kant becomes possible in Schiller thanks to the beautiful symbol and its presentation of the infinite” (72). The word “sublimest” is Schiller’s attempt to tame the sublime and make it appear approachable as the end of a linear progression, as if things could become *sublime*, *sUBLImer*, and *sublI mest*. But the Kantian sublime is supposed to be incomprehensible and beyond comparison. Warminski concludes that “sublimest” here is “the mark of a stutter” in Schiller’s text, for it unwittingly reveals how Schiller struggles to include the sublime into his philosophical system without making it seem absurd (75). The word “sublimest” is Schiller’s attempt to conceal by means of rhetoric the incommensurability between the
sublime as an impossible task for humanity and the beautiful as a pre-posed solution to human self-dividedness. This textual stutter leaves a trace. It reveals a disjunction between the tropological and the performative. In Schiller’s tropological system, the sublime is supposed to be possible and comprehensible. Yet the term “sublimest” reveals this to be a mere illusion: the illogical word performs the impossibility of the sublime. “Rather than proving the existence of beauty,” Warminsiki writes, “[…] Schiller’s text instead repeats the aporetic (rhetorical) structure of Kant’s sublime (mathematical and dynamic)” (76). Schiller thus fails to do what he had set out to do. Just as Kant fails to ground his system on a stable notion of the aesthetic, Schiller fails to prove the possibility of the beautiful by making it a “sublimest” task.

Let us assume that Warminsiki’s reading of Schiller is right. How should one react to this textual “stutter” in Schiller’s text? Well, if de Man praises Kant for unwittingly undoing the foundation of his philosophy system, why should we not praise Schiller for doing the same? It is strange: even though Warminsiki admits that the textual “stutter” in Schiller’s text repeats the exact aporetic structure of the Kantian sublime, he does not give Schiller credit for making manifest the materiality of language. Whereas the unexplained gap in Kant between the mathematical and dynamic sublime is read as a sign of critical rigor, the unexplained gap in Schiller between the “sublimest” humanity and the unproven beautiful is read as a sign of intellectual clumsiness. It is hard to see how this is not double-standard. Warminsiki tries to mask this double-standard with forceful rhetoric, constantly mocking Schiller’s cluelessness and bombarding the reader with pedagogical messages. Yet if we bracket off the polemic, it is clear that there is no criterion to decide whether a
textual “stutter” is to be read as a sign of critical rigor or intellectual naivety. Such gaps are found in many texts: whether one chooses to mock or valorize them is an arbitrary decision.

Warminski’s decision to favor the Kantian gap allows him to reaffirm the moral of de Man’s story, which is the story he wanted to tell all along. Once again, Kant is valorized as a critical thinker, while Schiller is mocked as ideological and naïve. Warminski thinks he is diagnosing the ideology of the aesthetic, but in fact, he is himself the culprit. He is the one aestheticizing Schiller. He is doing exactly what De Man condemns. That the moral of this story should be so unambiguous in Warminski’s text is ironic: instead of critiquing the ideology of the aesthetic, he ends up aestheticizing the ideology of ideology-critiques.

V.

We have seen how de Man, Redfield, and Warminski regards the Ästhetische Briefe as a founding text of the ideology of the aesthetic. We have also seen how, in attributing Schiller a fixed ideology, they end up performing the very thing that they criticize Schiller of doing, namely, aestheticization. De Man, Redfield, and Warminski aestheticize Schiller’s text, and in so doing, they end up creating a series of binary oppositions that constitutes another ideology. In failing to read Schiller, however, they also show us how not to read Schiller. Their primary contribution to Schiller scholarship is to show us the hollowness of rhetoric-based ideology critiques.

But the question remains: even if De Man, Redfield, and Warminski are guilty of aestheticization, are they not right to point out that Schiller is at fault? Despite the violence, are their interpretations of Schiller not fair and accurate? Is the Ästhetische Briefe not a text
that valorizes aestheticization? As Chapter 2 and 3 will demonstrate, the answer to all these questions is “no.” De Man, Redfield, and Warminski have fundamentally misunderstood what the Ästhetische Briefe is about. Despite their constant appeals to philosophical rigor, de Man, Redfield, nor Warminski often misread technical terms in Schiller’s texts, crudely oversimplifying the argument without grasping the context. (Their readings of Kant are, if anything, even more erroneous.13) Their interpretation of the Ästhetische Briefe is based on the following three fundamental misunderstandings of the text:

a) De Man, Redfield, and Warminski all characterize Schiller as a non-philosopher who turns the aesthetic into an empirical rather than a transcendental concept. This is demonstrably false. As Beiser (2005) correctly argues, the Ästhetische Briefe keeps the empirical and the transcendental consistently separate: while the aesthetic is analyzed in Letters XI-XV and XIX-XXII as a transcendental concept, the rest of the letters is concerned with the aesthetic from the viewpoint of philosophical anthropology (which is neither transcendental nor empirical). Although Schiller uses the term “drives” (Trieb) to describe aesthetic play in Letters XI-XV, this is

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13 Particularly embarrassing are de Man’s assertions that the Third Critique’s section on the dynamic sublime is ungrounded and does not “fit” into Kant’s system. In fact, the architectonic of Kant’s philosophical system requires the dynamic sublime to complement the mathematical sublime, since the mathematical sublime corresponds to the “mathematical” (i.e. quantitative and qualitative) categories of judgment, which Kant outlines in the Transcendental Analytic (in the First Critique), while the dynamic sublime corresponds to the “dynamic” (i.e. relational and modal) categories of judgment. Similarly, de Man’s claim that Kant’s dynamic sublime stems from a “failure of representation” and has “nothing to do” with self-preservation is misleading. Kant’s dynamic sublime does not stem from a “failure of representation” as de Man maintains: reason here, in fact, succeeds in recognizing the discrepancy between the immensity of nature’s power and our empirical selves’ relative weakness. We experience the dynamic sublime not because we are unable to grasp nature’s power (that would turn it into a mathematical sublime), but because we suddenly become aware of our capacity to determine our own ends independently of nature’s power. Schiller is thus right to connect the dynamic sublime with practical reason. (See Kritik der Urteilskraft, §28, pp. 262-3. See also Beiser’s Schiller as Philosopher, pp. 260-1.)
a technical concept meant to signify the procedures involved in the transcendental subject’s faculties of receptivity and spontaneity. The drives are transcendental, in other words, not empirical.\textsuperscript{14} As for Schiller’s qualification as a philosopher? Much has already been written on this issue.\textsuperscript{15}

b) According to De Man and Warminski, Schiller uses “the human” as a “principle of closure.” The argument supposes that Schiller views the human as a Platonic ideal that we strive after. But Schiller does not conceive of the human as a Platonic ideal. He conceives of the human as a \textit{regulative idea}, that is, as a norm presupposed by

\textsuperscript{14} That Schiller is genuinely interested in figuring out the transcendental condition of the aesthetic is especially clear in the Kallias-Briefe, a text that neither de Man nor his followers cite. Schiller does describe his aesthetic theory as “empirical” in this text, but all he means to say is that experience is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for aesthetic judgment. Beiser discusses this in more detail in \textit{Schiller as Philosopher}, pp. 54-55.

\textsuperscript{15} Not many anglophone philosophers have researched Schiller, but those who have done so tend to regard him in an extremely positive light. Despite reservations about lingering Kantian dualism, Stephen Houlgate describes Schiller’s theory of the beautiful as “one of the greatest of all aesthetic theories” (47). Anne Margaret Baxley, meanwhile, praises Schiller’s \textit{Über Anmut und Würde} for anticipating critiques of Kantian rationalism by contemporary virtue ethicists, calling the work “an important philosophical treatise in its own right, one that deserves to be included in the canon of serious works in the history of ethics” (1085). Frederick Beiser, who is currently one of the leading historians of German philosophy, has the following to say about literature professors who question Schiller’s stature as a philosophical thinker:

\begin{quote}
Often, Schiller’s philosophical stature is questioned by literary historians. Anxious to prove their own philosophical credentials, they stress Schiller’s many philosophical vices: his vagueness and inconsistency, his bungled conceptual division, his many lapses in argument. Such mistakes, they assume, could only be made by a poet. What these scholars are perhaps too polite to say, however, is that such blunders are endemic in philosophy. As any philosopher would concede, they are simply business as usual. If the absence of such vices were the test of a true philosopher, there would be no such beasts. In fact, measured in terms of sheer rigour, Schiller is not an especially problematic case at all. He is no less rigorous than Kant or Hume, whose place in the canon has never been subject to question. (\textit{Schiller as Philosopher} 8-9)
\end{quote}

As for Schiller versus Kant? Not everyone agrees that Kant is necessarily the superior philosopher. “My central thesis,” Beiser writes, “is that, in fundamental respects, Schiller’s ethics and aesthetics are an improvement on Kant’s. Where Kant is vague, inconsistent and narrow, Schiller is clear, consistent, and broad” (\textit{Schiller as Philosopher} 2).
reason. Regulative ideas are not empirical concepts. They cannot become actual. Yet regulative ideas are needed for reason to function as reason. When we try to verify scientific hypotheses by measuring it against empirical phenomena, we are implicitly positing an idea of nature as a unified entity. That is a regulative idea that theoretical reason cannot avoid positing. When we decide to act one way rather than another, i.e. when we deliberate upon our actions, we are already positing a coming together of sense and reason. That is a regulative idea that practical reason cannot avoid positing. Schiller’s notion of the human is a regulative idea in this sense. It is not something we strive after the way we strive after goodness, glory, or wealth. It is a ‘limit’ implicit in rational agency. If anything, the concept of the ‘human’ is best described, not as a principle of closure, but of dis-closure, since, as practical reason, it always reveals a horizon of possibility beyond what is given.16

c) De Man and his followers define Schiller’s concept of the aesthetic as the sensible representation, expression, or manifestation of an idea. But this is not how Schiller conceives of the aesthetic. When Schiller speaks of the beautiful as the sensible appearance of freedom, “appearance” does not mean expression or representation. Appearance here means “semblance.” The sensible appearance of freedom means that something that we see appears as if it were free: a relationship of similarity is established between the sensible and the suprasensible.17 The word “free” describes

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16 We will discuss the logic of the human in more detail in Chapter 3. I argue there that the human necessarily implies a form of life and thus a free use of the body. The human, one might say, is not a specific telos that we strive after but a certain mode of living.

17 For more on semblance vs appearance, see Beiser’s Schiller as Philosopher, pp. 63-4.
how something appears, not what appears. Thus, there is no implication here of a correspondence between sign and meaning.

Now that de Man’s reading of Schiller is exposed as not only false but violently so, we can finally revisit Schiller and read the Ästhetische Briefe with open eyes. Schiller is not an ideologue of the aesthetic. The goal of the Ästhetische Briefe is not to ‘improve’ humanity by telling us how art will bring about a reconciliation of sense and reason. Something far more important is at stake. But what exactly? In the next chapter, we will examine how Schiller conceives of aesthetic experience as something that is far more meaning-disruptive than Kant’s aesthetic judgment. For Schiller, aesthetic experience is not just a free play of the faculties: it is a disoperation of logic, a deactivation of theoretical and practical reason. But ‘the aesthetic condition’ (Schiller’s term for aesthetic experience) is not limited to the realm of the arts, nor that of the beautiful and the sublime. It is an operation of thought that has far-reaching implications in ethics and politics. Our task now is to figure out the logic (or anti-logic) of this thought operation, and to trace its myriad consequences in history.

CHAPTER 2: AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Chapter 2.1 – A New Way of Looking

I.

The Belvedere Torso. A mutilated sculpture. A marble fragment depicting contorted musculature with neither head nor limbs. It is an odd piece of artwork to call “beautiful.”
One cannot describe it as a work of harmonious proportions, since its body is incomplete. Nor can one praise it for its expressivity, since it is not clear whom the figure represents or which action it is supposed to depict. Yet this ancient marble torso *is* beautiful, at least in the eyes of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who describes it as the ideal of a human body elevated above nature, with muscular lines rising and falling like oceanic waves.\(^\text{18}\) This powerful yet tranquil body, Winckelmann speculates, must be that of the great Hercules, deep in lofty contemplation. Yet if the work suggests such an interpretation, it is not due to its power of expression, but precisely to its lack thereof. It is *indeterminacy* that stirs the imagination here. Removed from all ostensible narrative contexts, with neither head nor limbs, the marble fragment gives off the appearance of divine-like apathy, of a dynamic body at rest – like Hercules, the heroic figure of action, at the end of his labors, in a state of serene inaction. Energetic yet calm, active yet passive, suggestive yet inexpressive: it was a new way of looking at art, a new way of describing the beautiful.

This, in any case, is how Jacques Rancière stages his reading of Winckelmann in the opening chapter of *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. The thrust of Rancière’s argument there is easy to summarize: whereas earlier writers praised harmony of proportion and expression of meaning as their primary criteria of beauty, Winckelmann praised ambiguity as a source of the beautiful. He was one of the first theorist of the arts to separate the appearance of the beautiful from suprasensible rules of harmony or mimetic expression. In the age of neo-classical poetics, when artists such as Nicolas Poussin, Jean-Baptiste Lully, and Molière were regarded as the leading figures in their fields, such rules

were still considered essential for art. Art then was understood to be a product of *mimēsis*: its function was to represent, by means of poetic arrangement, the world of human speeches and actions. For art to do that, however, there were conventions to follow to differentiate the depicted objects according to their status. Just as different registers of language were used to address people of different social backgrounds, specific arrangements of the artistic medium were used to represent the status of characters, affects, and things. This logic of ordered representation was present in all the major fields of art: gestures were codified in paintings, dramas, and dance; musical and rhetorical figures were standardized into easily recognizable patterns in poetry and music; numerous treatises were written on the correct use of meters in every genre of poetry; countless discussions were raised on how best to implement the Aristotelian unities of time, space, and action in a well-structured drama. It was an era where appearance and meaning (i.e. the signifier and the signified), as well as cause and effect (i.e. the artwork and its intended audience), were ordered according to established norms. But all this began to change by the time Winckelmann wrote his description of the Belvedere Torso. By then, a new understanding of what constituted a work of art was emerging. Art gradually became a site for spectators to share in a special type of experience, an experience that many believe was universal to all humanity since it requires nothing more than the suspension of determinate thought. The universality of this experience made art less elitist: since art was now just a matter of perceiving an appearance rather than understanding a hidden, esoteric content, it was now accessible to any spectator, not just to the expert of good taste. It was, as Rancière puts it, not only a “rupture of all specific relations between a sensible form and the expression of an exact meaning,” but
also “the rupture of every specific link between a sensible presence and a public that would be its public, the sensible milieu that would nourish it, or its natural addressee” (AIS 33).

The emergence of this new way of looking at a work of art signaled a regime change in the history of art reception. The old power structure governing what one ought to see in a work of art, and how one ought to see it, is gradually replaced with what Rancière calls the “aesthetic regime” of the arts. In contrast to the “representative regime” that dominated the seventeenth century, the aesthetic regime of the arts is not a system “where the dignity of the subject matter dictated the dignity of genres of representation (tragedy for the nobles, comedy for the people of meagre means; historical painting versus genre painting; etc.)” (POA 32). The aesthetic regime of the arts abolishes all hierarchies of subject matter and genre divisions. It meant that prose was no longer regarded as inferior to verse, and still life in painting was no longer seen as less elevated than biblical or mythological subjects. By the end of the nineteenth century, people of meagre means, mundane urban landscapes, and objects from everyday life were the subject of “great” art just as often as monarchs, warriors, and saints. In his lectures on the fine arts, Hegel used Murillo’s genre painting, Beggar Boys Eating Grapes and Melons, as an example of how art is able to realize its highest ideals through the most banal of subject matters. “The autonomy of painting [in the aesthetic regime of the arts],” Rancière explains, “is first and foremost the autonomy of its figures in relation to histories and allegories in which they had their place and function. The representation of the destitute, people who have no importance on their own, allows for the upheaval of the illustration of subjects towards the pure potential of appearance”
Art, in other words, was no longer about the depicted subject, but about its appearance. Form has replaced content as the source of aesthetic pleasure.

Since art in the aesthetic regime is nothing more than a “pure potential” of appearance, it is free to use anything as its subject, no matter how prosaic or banal. Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* takes advantage of this freedom by singing about everyday things, blending together verse and prose to blur the line between the elevated and the banal. The more art frees itself of the need for elevated subjects, however, the less it is able to differentiate itself from ordinary life. For the author of *Leaves of Grass*, this was something that ought to be celebrated. The title of Whitman’s work, Rancière says, “not only affirms the poetic thesis that governs it: all things are equal because the most infinitesimal contains the universe: ‘I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars.’ It incarnates this egalitarian procession in its very layout: the pages of a book must be considered like the detached leaves of any tree whatsoever, emanations of universal anonymous life” (AIS 71). Whitman’s work, in other words, equalizes all subject matter not only in the realm of appearances, but also in the realm of life. Poems for Whitman are like leaves of grass, the production of life from the earth, and life for Whitman is like poetry, the creation of forms to be beheld as joyful appearances. It was not an uncommon attitude for artists of his and subsequent generations. In the aesthetic regime, art often becomes life and life often becomes art. Much of twentieth century art bases itself on this paradoxical principle. Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, John Cage’s *4’33”*, and Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Soap Pads Box* all questioned the boundary between art and life, between
art and non-art. In the aesthetic regime of the arts, the transgression of “art” as a normative category yield aesthetic experience just as effectively as a technically accomplished work.

That art and life should be so closely intertwined that they start to merge, however, poses a problem for theorists of the arts. Since art according to the aesthetic regime is mere appearance, it is separate and autonomous from the empirical world. Aesthetic experience, Rancière writes, is only possible if there is a “rupture of the harmony that enabled correspondence between the texture of the work and its efficacy” (ES 62). If art and life can exchange properties, however, art would no longer be mere appearance and be separate from the empirical world. Is that not a contradiction? How can art affect the world and yet remain autonomous from it? Art is not life and yet life. Life is not art and yet art. It is a peculiar paradox. This paradox, according to Rancière, is not accidental. It is an essential feature of aesthetic experience.

If we want to understand what aesthetic experience is, we need to delve deeper into this dialectic of art and life. Rancière is not the only theorist of the aesthetic to conceive of aesthetic experience in these terms. Among others, Hegel and Adorno also conceived of art as having a dialectical relationship to life. But there is one other author whom Rancière thinks plays a particularly decisive role in articulating the dialectic of art and life. In fact, whenever Rancière mentions the aesthetic regime, this author is usually one of the first names that he mentions. “The aesthetic regime of the arts,” he says,

is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy in the arts, subject matter, and genres. Yet it does so by destroying the mimetic barrier that distinguished ways of doing
and making affiliated with art from other ways of doing and making, a barrier that separated its rules from the order of social occupations. The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself. Schiller’s *aesthetic state*, which is this regime’s first manifesto (and remains, in a sense, unsurpassable), clearly indicates this fundamental identity of opposites. The aesthetic state is a pure instance of suspension, a moment when form is experienced for itself. (*POA* 23-24)

According to Rancière, Schiller’s concept of the “aesthetic state” or “aesthetic condition”\(^\text{19}\) is one of the first to frame aesthetic experience as a paradox. Rancière seems to think highly of the concept, going so far as to describe it as in some ways “unsurpassable” and calling it the “first manifesto” of the aesthetic regime of the arts. Rancière’s characterization of Schiller’s concept as the first manifesto of the aesthetic regime is surprising, since it implies that Kant’s concept of aesthetic judgment, which preceded Schiller’s concept by around five years, is not as exemplary as Schiller’s. Why is the aesthetic condition more exemplary of the aesthetic regime than aesthetic judgment? What does Schiller’s concept do that Kant’s does not? To answer this question, we need to figure out in more precise terms what

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\(^{19}\) The term “ästhetischer Zustand” can be translated into English as either “aesthetic state” or “aesthetic condition.” For the sake of clarity, I will henceforth use only the latter phrase to signify the condition of aesthetic experience, for the former phrase is ambiguous and often confused with the term that Schiller uses to describe the aesthetic *political* state: “ästhetischer Staat.”
the “ästhetischer Zustand” means. The most promising place to begin our inquiry is Letter XIX of the Ästhetische Briefe.

II.

When most people think of the Ästhetische Briefe, they usually think of the “play drive” (Spieltrieb) as the main, central idea in Schiller’s aesthetics. The concept of the play drive, however, is not synonymous with aesthetic experience: its main function is to demonstrate how the experience of the beautiful is the result of an equilibrium in reciprocity (Wechselwirkung) between two opposing tendencies of the transcendental subject. Roughly put, whereas the form drive (Formtrieb) seeks to turn that which is constantly changing into something permanent (by subsuming it under rules or concepts), and whereas the material drive (Sachtrieb) seeks to supply that which is permanent with constantly changing material (by presenting concepts with sensory manifolds), the play drive is an idealized state of balance that occurs if and only if neither of these drives dominate the other. The fact that it is an idealized state of balance, however, implies that it is a regulative idea of reason and not an actual event in the mind of the subject. Although Schiller stresses in Letter XV that reason must demand that there be the play drive out of transcendental grounds, he never makes the ontological claim that the play drive exists independently of this demand (TS 613-4). To understand how Schiller conceives of aesthetic experience, we must look for another concept, one that describes what actually happens to the subject when it contemplates something beautiful. This is where the aesthetic condition comes in.
What is the aesthetic condition? Letter XIX of the Ästhetische Briefe describes how the human mind can be divided into three logical stages. In the beginning, before the mind receives any determinate information through sense impressions, it is a blank slate, an empty infinity (“eine leere Unendlichkeit”) (TS 625). At this stage, it is nothing more than an unused potential, like an empty container waiting to be filled up. The second stage occurs after the mind receives sense impressions and organizes them into a determinate reality (“Realität”). By delimiting space and time into configurations of actual force (“wirkende Kraft”), Schiller says, the mind negates the infinite but empty potential of the first stage into a finite and actual reality of the second stage (TS 626). The term that Schiller uses to describe this process of reality-formation is judging or thinking (“urtheilen oder denken”) (TS 626). The third stage takes place when the act of judgment or thinking successfully emancipates itself from the finite determinations of sense so that it becomes an infinite and open-ended activity that is able to determine its own content. Before this final stage could take place, however, Schiller argues there has to be a special intermediary stage where thought, though no longer determined by sense, is still in contact with it. In this special intermediary stage, thought and sense would be neither constrained nor separate from one another. Although the former is given material from the latter, it does not yet choose what to make of this material and is therefore still open to multiple possibilities of determination. Rather than producing a finite reality based on sense, the mind here “steps back” from finite reality to perceive it as something like a spectrum of infinite potential. As Schiller puts it in Letter XX:
Der Mensch kann nicht unmittelbar vom Empfinden zum Denken übergehen; er muß einen Schritt zurückthun, weil nur, indem eine Determination wieder aufgehoben wird, die entgegengesetzte eintreten kann. Er muß also, um Leiden mit Selbstthätigkeit, um eine passive Bestimmung mit einer aktiven zu vertauschen, augenblicklich von aller Bestimmung frei sein, und einen Zustand der bloßen Bestimmbarkeit durchlaufen. [...] Mithin muß er, auf gewisse Weise, zu jenem negativen Zustand der bloßen Bestimmungslosigkeit zurückkehren, in welchem er sich befand, ehe noch irgend etwas auf seinen Sinn einen Eindruck machte. Jener Zustand aber war an Inhalt völlig leer, und jetzt kommt es darauf an, eine gleiche Bestimmungslosigkeit, und eine gleich unbegrenzte Bestimmbarkeit mit dem größtmöglichen Gehalt zu vereinbaren, weil unmittelbar aus diesem Zustand etwas positives erfolgen soll. (TS 632-3)

The name that Schiller gives to this special intermediary state is the aesthetic condition („ästhetischer Zustand“). Like the first stage, the aesthetic condition is an indeterminate state, but unlike the empty or passive determinability of the first stage, the aesthetic condition is a state of real and active determinability (“Zustand der realen und aktiven Bestimmbarkeit”) (TS 633). The aesthetic condition, Schiller says, lacks determination not because it lacks reality, but because it unites every reality (“weil es alle Realität vereinigt”) (TS 635). In the aesthetic condition, in other words, thought constructs a reality that is overdeterminate, a reality that exceeds our capacity for conceptual organization and appears as
something *more* than we can grasp.\(^{20}\) Winckelmann’s description of the Belvedere Torso is a fine example of this state of active determinability: the mutilated figure is described by him as dynamic yet calm, powerful yet impotent, suggestive yet inexpressive. It suggests multiple semantic possibilities without signifying a fixed meaning. Since reality as it is experienced in the aesthetic condition grants thought the freedom to roam freely without the constraints of conceptual rules, Schiller says the aesthetic condition deserves to be called “*eine freie Stimmung*” \(\text{TS 633}\). Ultimately, the aesthetic condition for Schiller is an experience of freedom, for thought here is allowed to move beyond the confines of a conceptually regulated reality while remaining within the domain of the real.

At this point, it is fair to wonder whether Schiller’s aesthetic condition differs from Kant’s aesthetic judgment in any meaningful way. Schiller’s characterization of the former as “*eine freie Stimmung*” reminds us of Kant’s description of the latter as “[der] *Zustand eines freien Spiels der Erkenntnisvermögen*” \(\text{KdU 132, §9}\). Yet it is still unclear to what extent the notion of active determinability that Schiller stresses in Letter XX corresponds to Kant’s definition of aesthetic judgment as “the mere apprehension of the form of an object of intuition without relation to a concept for determinate cognition” (“*[die bloße]  

\(^{20}\) My reading here differs from Beiser’s (2005). Beiser defines the difference between passive and active determinability as follows: “The first abstract kind of determinability is characteristic of sense before any sense impression, and of rationality after it has abstracted from all conditions of sensibility. The second concrete kind of determinability is aesthetic. It is the whole of both kinds of determination, and so it includes the determinations of both reason and sensibility. It is indeterminate insofar as it is not exclusively one determination rather than another; but it is concrete insofar as it includes both within itself.” (154) My objection to this definition is that it characterizes sensibility as having determination by itself, which contradicts how Schiller characterizes the *Sachtrieb*. It makes more sense, I think, to say that sense is *given* determination by reason in determining judgments (when the mind constructs a concreate reality), but in the state of active determinability, the procedure of determination is left open-ended so that it never comes to closure.
Auffassung (apprehensio) der Form eines Gegenstandes der Anschauung, ohne Beziehung
derselben auf einen Begriff zu einem bestimmten Erkenntnis” (KdU 99, B xiv, A xlii).
What Kant means by “form” and how he thinks it is possible for “form” to be apprehended
without the determination of concepts requires careful unpacking. It is clear that aesthetic
experience for both Kant and Schiller is defined by the absence of conceptual determinacy,
but it is unclear whether Kant thinks this absence of conceptual determinacy entails both a
state of active determinability and an experience of freedom.

As always with Kant, it helps to start from the very beginning, which in this case is
the definition of cognition (“Erkenntnis”). In the First Critique, Kant describes the faculties
of the mind that constitutes our cognition as follows:

Unsere Erkenntnis entspringt aus zwei Grundquellen des Gemüts, deren die
erste ist, die Vorstellungen zu empfangen (die Rezeptivität der Eindrücke),
die zweite das Vermögen, durch diese Vorstellungen einen Gegenstand zu
erkennen (Spontaneität der Begriffe); durch die erstere wird uns ein
Gegenstand gegeben, durch die zweite wird dieser im Verhältnis auf jene
Vorstellung (als bloße Bestimmung des Gemüts) gedacht. Anschauung und
Begriffe machen also die Elemente aller unserer Erkenntnis aus, so daß
weder Begriffe, ohne ihnen auf einige Art korrespondierende Anschauung,
noch Anschauung ohne Begriffe, ein Erkenntnis abgeben können. (KrV 94,
A50-B57)

According to the passage, whenever we cognize an object, we are doing two things at once:
passively sensing impressions (“die Rezeptivität der Eindrücke”) and actively organizing
these impressions into an object ("Spontaneität der Begriffe"). We perceive things as an object ("Gegenstand"), in other words, if and only if both our passive and active faculties, i.e. sense receptivity and the understanding, are engaged in the formation of the object we experience. As Kant famously remarks in a subsequent paragraph, thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind (KrV 95, A51, B75). Now, the faculty of the mind that enjoins sense receptivity and the understanding in experience is judgment. For Kant, there is no such thing as perception without apperception, no seeing without judging: whenever we see an object (say, a pink cube), we also recognize it as that object ("that-pink-cube!"), which means that we implicitly judge it as an instance of something else ("This x is a pink cube"). In the First Critique, judgment is established as indispensable for all human cognition, and perception is conceived as something that necessarily involves both our active and passive faculties.

Now, in the Third Critique, Kant distinguishes between two types of judgment: determining ("bestimmend") and reflective ("reflektierend") (KdU, Einleitung IV, 5:179). In determining judgments, we encounter a particular and subsume it under a universal already given to consciousness. When we encounter a red apple, for instance, we may recognize it as an object of theoretical knowledge ("This x is a red apple") or as an object of our inclination ("This x is something I want to eat"). In both cases, there is an object and a given concept or purpose ascribed to it. In reflective judgments, however, we encounter a particular without a universal. When we are mesmerized by the beauty of a flower, for example, it does not matter which botanical species it belongs to or what practical use it may have: we simply allow our minds to become transfixed by its shape and colors, taking
pleasure in its visual organization (and the fact that this pleasure is sharable to like-minded beings). Not all reflective judgments, however, are concerned with the beautiful. Kant says that there are two types of reflective judgments: aesthetic and teleological. If the particular we encounter in the reflective judgment is thought to be objectively “purposive” (i.e. the object is thought to be organized according to an end), it is a teleological judgment. This happens, for example, when we observe an exotic flower and think of its leaves, stem, petals, and all the organs as having a reciprocal relation that together form a purposeful whole. Aesthetic judgments, on the other hand, occurs when the particular we encounter in experience manifests itself as having no unified purpose, but its appearance nevertheless displays for us “the mere form of purposiveness” (“die bloße Form der Zweckmäßigkeit”) (KdU 136, §11, 5:221). The phrase “mere form of purposiveness” here designates the apparent suitability of the intuited object for cognition even when the rules constituting its organization are not immediately available (essentially, it means that judgment is able to think of something as a unity without unifying the sense manifold under a concept). When we encounter an object of nature that we do not have a concept of, or when we decide not to make use of that concept, the object appears to us as something that is not conceptually unified, and yet judgment proceeds to cognize this object as if it had an underlying unity that exceeds its grasp (it anticipates this unity amidst the diversity of the sensory manifold). Unlike in teleological judgments, then, the term “purposive” here does not apply not to the object of experience but to the procedure of judgment itself. Kant defines the beautiful as the “Form der Zweckmäßigkeit eines Gegenstandes, sofern sie, ohne Vorstellung eines Zwecks, an ihm wahrgenommen wird” (KdU 155, §17). This definition makes clear how
objects in aesthetic judgments show themselves as something that could (potentially) be given conceptual determination (for they are purposive, i.e. suitable for cognition) though they do not yet have one (for they are without a purpose, i.e. lacking in concepts). Aesthetic objects are therefore indeterminate yet determinable (i.e. capable of further determination). This idea of purposiveness without purpose is more or less synonymous with what Schiller calls active or aesthetic “determinability” (“Bestimmbarkeit”) (TS 633). On this matter, Kant’s and Schiller’s thoughts do not significantly differ.

Where Kant’s and Schiller’s accounts start to differ is in their characterizations of the freedom that we encounter in aesthetic experience. For Kant, this freedom is derived solely from cognitive “free play.” According to him, the imagination is a faculty of cognition that presents sense manifolds, while the understanding is a faculty of cognition that unites the said manifold under a concept. In determining judgments, the sense manifold is unified under a determinate concept and the imagination must therefore follow the rules of cognition that the understanding dictates. In aesthetic judgments, however, a harmonious “free play” between the imagination and the understanding is made possible because there are no determinate concepts to restrict the movements of the cognitive faculties (“weil kein bestimmter Begriff [die Erkenntniskräfte] auf eine besondere Erkenntnisregel einschränkt”) (KdU 132, §9). The fact that the imagination here is no longer guided by conceptual rules imposed by the understanding means that it is free from external constraint, but the fact that judgment here proceeds in a purposive manner saves the mind from falling into an anarchic state. Aesthetic judgments, Kant says, puts the mind in a special state of “free lawfulness” (“freie Gesetzmäßigkeit”) or “lawfulness without law”
(“eine Gesetzmäßigkeit ohne Gesetz”) (KdU 160-1, §22). That means the freedom that we experience in aesthetic judgments is merely a negative one: it is the freedom of not being constrained by a law other than one’s own (which is different from the freedom of choosing a law that is one’s own). As Kant himself stresses, the understanding alone is the lawgiver in cognition (“Der Verstand allein gibt das Gesetz”) (KdU 161, §22). As a lower mental faculty, the imagination cannot legislate its own laws, and the power of judgment only provides procedural lawfulness, not substantive laws. The only type of aesthetic judgment that Kant thinks leads us to think of ourselves as free in the positive sense of word are judgments of the sublime, which occasion a rupture in the free play of the imagination and the understanding and make the subject become aware of itself as having the capacity to set its own ends independently of nature. But Kant conceives of the sublime as a limit case where aesthetic judgment breaks down: aesthetic judgment itself does not present the subject with freedom in the positive sense. What we experience in judgments of beauty, Kant remarks, is more the freedom of play than the freedom of a “lawful business” that is the true property of morality (“mehr die Freiheit im Spiele, als unter einem gesetzlichen Geschäfte vorgestellte: welches die echte Beschaffenheit der Sittlichkeit des Menschen ist [...]”) (KdU 194, 5:268-9). Even in judgments of the sublime, what we experience is our dignity as end-setting beings, not our capacity to decide which ends we set for ourselves. Aesthetic freedom does not entail choice in either case: there is no freedom of decision here as there is in judgments of morality, where reason postulates a power of choice in the intelligible world which decides whether the subject will act in accordance with the moral
law (see *KpV* 5:46-50). Aesthetic freedom for Kant is thus fundamentally different from moral freedom. In Kant’s system, there is no direct path from aesthetic to moral autonomy.

There is, however, an indirect path. In §59 of the Third Critique, Kant asserts that the beautiful is a “symbol” of the morally good (“das Schöne ist das Symbol des Sittlichguten”) since there are structural parallels between the good and the beautiful (*KdU* 297, §59). In both moral and aesthetic judgments, he argues, the sensible (i.e. the will or the imagination) conforms to the suprasensible (i.e. the categorical imperative or the form of purposiveness) in a harmonious and univocal (“einstimmig”) manner:


Even if we do not directly experience positive freedom in aesthetic judgments in the strong sense of being empowered with the power of choice, the harmonious agreement between our sensible and suprasensible faculties that we experience in aesthetic judgments is analogous to what we experience in moral judgments when we are virtuous: in both these cases, what we experience is the agreement between lawful principles and sensibility. Besides this structural parallel between our experience of the good and that of the beautiful, Kant also argues that the beautiful prepares us to love nature without interest (“Das Schöne bereit uns vor, etwas, selbst die Natur, ohne Interesse zu lieben”), while the sublime teaches us to esteem it *against* our interest (“es, wider unser (sinnliches) Interesse,
hochzuschätzen”). It means that the beautiful and the sublime both make us become less susceptible to sense determination and conversely more susceptible to suprasensible ones, thus improving our capacity for virtuous deeds (*KdU* 193, Allgemeine Anmerkung after §29, 5:268). Even if aesthetic judgment does not give us a direct experience of moral freedom, it gives us an experience of being liberated from sense determination that is conducive to moral reasoning. As such, in Kant’s philosophical system, there is an indirect path from aesthetic freedom to moral freedom by way of structural analogy.

This is not quite how Schiller conceives of freedom in aesthetic experience. Although Schiller agrees with Kant that our experience of the beautiful liberates the mind from external constraints, he also argues that we experience *positive* freedom. For here, Schiller says in Letter XIX, the *will* claims its freedom to choose between the sensible and the suprasensible drives (“der Wille behauptet eine vollkommene Freyheit zwischen beyden”) (*TS* 629). Aesthetic determinability for Schiller implies a capacity to choose how something is to be determined: if object *x* is indeterminate and therefore neither conditioned by sense nor thought, the will is free to decide whether *x* is to become an object of sense or thought, i.e. whether it is to be determined by subjective associations or by an objective understanding, by sense inclinations or by moral principles. As a middle ground that is neither reducible to our sensible nor our suprasensible natures, the will alone has this power of choice.21 Through aesthetic determinability, Schiller says in Letter XXI, the subject is

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21 Schiller’s characterization of the will as a mediating power that stands above our sensible and suprasensible natures demonstrates how Schiller is already trying to move beyond the bounds of Kant’s philosophical system towards the speculative philosophy of German Idealism. It is significant that the will for Schiller is neither identical to the “mind” of the transcendental subject nor to the “world” that impinges it with sense impressions, for as a middle ground, it unifies both. “Der Wille ist es also,” Schiller writes, “der sich gegen beide Triebe als eine *Macht* (als Grund der
able to make of himself what he wills ("aus sich selbst zu machen, was er will") (TS 636). Moreover, since we cannot make moral decisions without thinking of ourselves as free, moral deliberation is not possible without a prior experience of aesthetic freedom. Schiller makes this clear in Letter XXIII when he describes the aesthetic condition as a transitional state that humans must undergo to become rational beings ("es giebt keinen andern Weg, den sinnlichen Menschen vernünftig zu machen, als daß man denselben zuvor ästhetisch macht") (TS 643). Hence the path from aesthetic to moral freedom for Schiller is not symbolic but sequential: since moral deliberation presupposes freedom of choice, and since freedom of choice is only possible through the aesthetic condition, it follows that aesthetic freedom must precede moral freedom; the former alone makes the latter possible.

Is freedom of choice really possible in the aesthetic condition, though? A Kantian might object here that freedom of choice is only possible in the intelligible world and not as an event presented in aesthetic experience. After all, everything in the empirical world is determined by natural causality, including our mental cognitions. The only freedom that we experience in the empirical world for Kant is the freedom to act according to the moral

Wirklichkeit) verhält… Es gibt in dem Menschen keine andere Macht, als seinen Willen, und nur was den Menschen aufhebt, der Tod und jeder Raub des Bewußtseins, kann die innere Freiheit aufheben” (TS 629).

22 Kant himself observes in the Second Critique that freedom (along with God and immortality) is a postulate of practical reason, i.e. an idea that we cannot prove but must nevertheless assume to be true whenever we deliberate upon a possible course of action (for the logic of moral discourse requires such ideas). Schiller agrees with Kant that the idea of freedom is a prerequisite for practical reasoning, but he prefers not to think of it as an a priori postulate, preferring instead to think of it as something that we experience in the aesthetic condition. The advantage of Schiller’s account is that it allows us to conceive of freedom as the product of a certain stage in the development of reason rather than as one of its fixed properties. The disadvantage is that it brings freedom down to the realm of the phenomenal, thus making it unsuitable for grounding the moral law (something Schiller is less interested in).
law, but this freedom does not involve choice. In the Kantian system, aesthetic freedom and freedom of choice have nothing to do with one another. So why does Schiller argue otherwise? Perhaps it is because freedom of choice means something different for Schiller. Kant defines the freedom of choice (Willkür) in *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* as a causal power combined with consciousness of the moral law (*MdS* 18, 6:213-4). Since everything is determined in the empirical world, we cannot understand this causal power of the will, and therefore must posit it as possible only in the intelligible world. Freedom of choice for Schiller by contrast is a much less ambitious concept. It does not require the will to be the cause of one’s action – it only requires that one is conscious of possible choices, and this happens in the aesthetic condition when all representations of necessity are suspended. In an extended footnote to Letter XX, Schiller explicitly states that though the subject in the aesthetic condition is not free from the laws of natural necessity, it is free from the representation of such laws (*TS* 634). In the aesthetic condition, in other words, the will is free because it is conscious of itself as confronted with an apparent choice (between determinations of the sensible and the suprasensible drives). Whether the will’s choice has actual causal agency is a question that Schiller does not pursue.\(^{23}\)

\(^{23}\) In the footnote to Letter XIX, Schiller explains that there are two ways to conceive of freedom. On the one hand, he says, freedom could be conceived as an attribute of reason (this is how Kant thinks of freedom); on the other hand, it could be conceived as an attribute of our whole nature (i.e. the totality of our being, which involves both sense and reason). Schiller clearly states here that he is interested primarily in the latter form of freedom, but he does not explicitly say whether this latter freedom should be understood as the capacity for choice (i.e. the ability to choose between two opposing drives) or as the capacity for deed (i.e. the ability to act as a unified totality). That he must mean the former, however, can be inferred from his insistence in Letter XVIII that sense and thought are infinitely distant and can never become one (*TS* 622). The human being is free so long as she remains in an aesthetic (i.e. reflective) state, but the moment she acts, she becomes determinate and is no longer fully free. This problematic between aesthetic freedom and practical agency plays an important role in many of Schiller’s dramatic works (Wallenstein’s indecision, for
By making the aesthetic condition an experience of positive freedom, Schiller also introduces the idea that aesthetic experience is always on its way towards self-dissolution, for positive freedom entails choice, and choice entails determination through concept, which in turn entails the end of aesthetic determinability. Whereas Kant emphasizes aesthetic judgment as a self-sustaining mode of experience (where the state of cognitive free play indefinitely sustains and reproduces itself), Schiller emphasizes the aesthetic condition as an unstable indeterminate state that must eventually become determinate through a positive decision of the will. This explains why Schiller calls the aesthetic condition “eine mittlere Stimmung” in Letter XX (TS 633) and “einen mittleren Zustand” in Letter XXIII (TS 643). It also explains why he insists on distinguishing between beauty as it is conceived by reason (the idea of the beautiful) and beauty as it actually appears (the experience of the beautiful). In Letter XVI, after having defined the beautiful as the result of an equilibrium of the Sach- and Formtrieb, Schiller says:

Dieses Gleichgewicht bleibt aber immer nur Idee, die von der Wirklichkeit nie ganz erreicht werden kann. In der Wirklichkeit wird immer ein Übergewicht des Einen Elements über das andere übrig blieben, und das höchste was die Erfahrung leistet, wird in einer Schwankung zwischen beiden Prinzipien bestehen, wo bald die Realität bald die Form überwiegend ist. Die Schönheit in der Idee ist also ewig nur eine unteilbarer einzige, weil es nur ein einziges Gleichgewicht geben kann; die Schönheit in der Erfahrung hingegen wird ewig eine doppelte sein, weil bei einer example, could be interpreted as a misguided attempt to preserve aesthetic freedom in the realm of the political, where decisions must be made).
Schwankung das Gleichgewicht auf eine doppelte Art, nehmlich diesseits und jenseits, kann übertreten werden. (TS 615)

It is amazing how many commentators choose to ignore or overlook this statement. Schiller here is effectively conceding that pure beauty, which Kant certainly thinks is possible in aesthetic experience, is in fact not experienceable at all. Experiential beauty for Schiller is always in the process of becoming either determinate or indeterminate, it is a transitory process without a stable ground. Schiller therefore recognizes only two types of beauty in experience: “melting” and “energizing” (“schmelzende und energische Schönheit”) (TS 616). Melting beauty, he says, is brought about by the uniform slowing down of both sense and thought (“die gleichförmige Erschlaffung [der] sinnlichen und geistigen Kräfte”) (TS 620). It is suited for subjects who suffer from excessive determination. To counteract the dominations of sensible or conceptual determinacy, melting beauty presents itself as both a serene form that guides the sensible drives towards conceptual thought (“Sie wird erstlich als ruhige Form, das wilde Leben besänftigen, und von Empfindungen zu Gedanken den Uebergang bahnen”) and as a living image that guides conceptual thought back to sensible intuitions (“Sie wird zweytens als lebendes Bild […] den Begriff zur Anschauung und das Gesetz zum Gefühl zurückführen”) (TS 621). Energizing beauty, meanwhile, is suited for subjects who are overly refined (i.e. overly indeterminate or reflective), and therefore predisposed to feeling apathetic (TS 617). To counteract their indeterminacy, energizing beauty “tenses up” both the physical-sensible and moral-suprasensible faculties of the subject, thus creating a state of tension that will eventually resolve itself in practical or theoretical determination (TS 617). Melting beauty thus leads to a state of conceptual
indetermination, while energizing beauty brings about a state of increased tension that soon yields determinacy. Both types of beauty demonstrate how Schiller conceives of aesthetic experience as a dynamic transitory process that is either acting against or moving towards non-aesthetic experience rather than as a self-maintaining mode of judgment.

Experiential beauty, then, is never “pure” for Schiller. It is always counteracting a state of imbalance in the subject to bring about a different (yet just as imbalanced) state. Beauty here moves back and forth between the state of indeterminate reflection and the state of determinate conceptualization. The aesthetic condition is conceived as a to-and-fro movement that never settles into a stable state of being (determinate) or becoming (indeterminate), a movement that is always traversing in-between. This condition of unstable transitory mediation, which has the quality of being on its way towards something else, allows aesthetic experience to play a far bigger role in the history of the subject than in Kant’s philosophical system. As an intermediary stage between the pre-reflective and the reflective stages of the subject’s consciousness, the aesthetic condition is assigned the special role of grounding the subject’s self-awareness. To be aware of oneself as a “self” is to be in the aesthetic condition, for it is the state in which the prereflective world is first negated into an “other” outside of itself. In a striking passage from Letter XXV, Schiller remarks that the aesthetic condition occurs when the subject first regards the world as being outside of itself, i.e. when Self and World first bifurcates (TS 655). Before this moment, Schiller says, the human being is still within the “Sinnenwelt” where Self and World are “noch völlig Eins” (TS 655). The aesthetic condition is thus identified with the originary moment when the subject first steps back from its immediate surround to regard itself as
autonomous and therefore separate from other beings: “Die Betrachtung (Reflexion) ist das erste liberale Verhältnis des Menschen zu dem Weltall, das ihn umgibt,” Schiller writes (TS 655). The statement in effect transforms the aesthetic condition into the ground of thinking in general: before we are in a position to determine what the world is, we must already have a world, and this occurs by way of the aesthetic condition, i.e. by abstracting the “self” from the immediate surround. The aesthetic condition is the unstable intermediary phase that takes us from being-in-the-world to standing-before-the-world, from having the natural attitude of first-order world disclosure to having the theoretical attitude of second-order world disclosure. Seen in this light, it has less to do with beauty than with the way the subject comes to regard itself as a subject and achieves self-consciousness. To return to the aesthetic condition is to return to the originary scene of subject-object bifurcation, where the Other first emerges, so that One becomes Two. “Erst, wenn [der Mensch] in seinem ästhetischen Stande, [die Welt] außer sich stellt oder betrachtet,” says Schiller, “sondert sich seine Persönlichkeit von ihr ab, und es erscheint ihm eine Welt, weil er aufgehört hat, mit derselben Eins auszumachen” (TS 655). This event is far more consequential than the “free play” of the cognitive faculties that Kant describes. As the first step towards self-consciousness, the aesthetic condition opens up a world-horizon for the subject, allowing it to adopt the attitude of a thinking spectator who

24 Unlike aesthetic judgments, the concept of the aesthetic condition is both a transcendental and a genetic-anthropological concept: it describes not only the a priori structure of consciousness, but also how this consciousness develops into rational self-reflexivity. In this respect, it can be regarded as an important precursor to Schelling’s and Hegel’s philosophical systems (as articulated in the former’s System des Transzendental Idealismus and the latter’s Phänomenologie des Geistes).
is aware of the self as having a double nature, as something that stands both in and before the world.

We are now in a position to summarize the key difference between Kant’s and Schiller’s conceptions of aesthetic experience. Although Kant and Schiller both conceive of aesthetic experience as an experience of conceptual indeterminacy, they disagree what kind of freedom is encountered in such experience. Whereas Kant conceives of the “free play” of the cognitive faculties as negative freedom or the freedom from external constraint, Schiller’s notion of aesthetic “determinability” emphasizes the aesthetic condition as the enabler of two positive capacities: (1) the capacity of the subject to regard itself as free to determine itself through the will’s power of decision, and (2) the capacity of the subject to step back from its telos-governed lifeworld to adopt the reflective attitude of a self-aware spectator. Kant’s aesthetic judgment, one might say, is less dynamic and more formal: it describes the a priori structure of aesthetic experience, but it does not describe how this experience might emerge from the history of the living subject. Compared to Kant, Schiller puts much more emphasis on the subject’s genealogy. His tendency to “anthropologize” aesthetic experience should be seen through this lens: when Martin Heidegger gave a series of lectures on Schiller’s Ästhetische Briefe in the winter semester of 1936/37, he warned his students not to misinterpret the aesthetic condition as a psychological concept, but to regard it as “der Grundzustand der Ermöglichung des Wissens und des Handelns” (70). The term “Grundzustand” here is apt, for it suggests that the aesthetic condition does not describe a state of mind, but rather the fundamental ground
that makes all knowing and doing possible (i.e. the absolute that precedes and enables the logic of “is” and “ought”).

So why is Schiller’s aesthetic condition more exemplary of the aesthetic regime than Kant’s aesthetic judgment? Perhaps it has to do with the fact that Schiller repeatedly describes the aesthetic condition as being on its way towards the non-aesthetic, as always transitioning into something else, into something that it is not, namely, life. Rather than conceiving of aesthetic experience as a self-reproducing cognitive state, Schiller describes it as something intertwined with the theoretical and the practical, as an in-between state without a stable ground. Rancière says that the aesthetic condition indicates a “fundamental identity of opposites” (POA 24). We can now appreciate what this statement means or does not mean. It most definitely does not mean that the aesthetic condition merges opposites together into a harmonious unity, as if opposites could be merged into a mystical union. What the aesthetic condition does is return us to the fundament where opposites first emerged, where the conscious Self first splits itself from the unconscious World. The aesthetic condition succeeds in returning us to this ground of opposites because it renders inoperative all demarcations of difference that normally operate in our lifeworld. Through the suspension of all purposive ends, what normally has sense is now stripped of sense, so that it presents itself as no longer that which it is, but as that which it is not. In the aesthetic condition, $p$ is no longer $p$, it is the erasure of $p$, the appearance of $p$ as not-$p$. The law of the excluded middle is adjourned. One might say that the operation of the aesthetic is the law of the included middle, a law which states that $p$ is always double, always $p$ and not-$p$. The Belvedere Torso is aesthetically pleasing because it appears to lack an essence: its
qualities cannot be decided, its meaning is interrupted, delayed. This is why Schiller argues in Letter XXII that the true artist must destroy the content of his art through form ("er [muss] den Stoff durch die Form vertilgt") (TS 641). Art for Schiller is an aesthetic object and an object is aesthetic if it shows itself as only form, i.e. as something that has been erased of its essence, as the manifestation of a \( P \) that has now become \( \text{not-}P \). This, in any case, is how artworks are perceived in the aesthetic regime: art in the aesthetic regime is always double and self-foreign, for in the aesthetic regime, Rancière writes,

artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-knowledge, \( \text{logos} \) identical with pathos, the intention of the unintentional, etc. (\( \text{POA} \) 23)

The aesthetic condition, by abolishing any connection between appearance and essence, turns the self-identical into the self-different. Hence objects in the aesthetic condition appear to have a riddle-like quality: they show themselves as something that has not yet been shown, they are manifestations of a concealment, the disclosure of the undisclosed. Schiller’s concept of the aesthetic condition illustrates this paradox of self-difference better

Jeffrey L. Powell argues in “Kant, Schiller, and Aesthetic Transformation” (2018) along similar lines that the aesthetic condition is best characterized as an “openness” that “operates according to only one law, which is that it never be reduced to the present” (170). Unfortunately, the evidence he cites to back this claim, taken from Schiller’s note to Letter XX, is somewhat thin and not entirely convincing, since Schiller there only talks about the laws governing the mind (\( \text{Gemü} \)) not appearing as a constraint. The passages from Letters XIX, XX, and XXV that I have cited here do a better job, I think, of showing how the operation of the aesthetic makes things appear as self-foreign, so that meaning is interrupted and delayed.
than Kant’s concept of aesthetic judgment because it stages itself as the originary scene of the subject-object split, an intermediary state that eventually dissolves itself to become something else. Kant may have been the superior philosopher, but Schiller was the first to put his finger on the paradoxical nature of aesthetic experience. It is why Rancière calls the aesthetic condition the “first manifesto” of the aesthetic regime.

By defining aesthetic judgment as the cognition of the form of purposiveness without purpose, Kant confines his description of aesthetic experience to the transcendental domain of a priori cognitive procedures. By reimagining the aesthetic from the perspective of a subject’s genealogy, Schiller liberates the aesthetic from the merely cognitive and transforms it into an unstable intermediary mode of lifeworld-orientation where logic and binary oppositions are suspended. With this transformation, a new problem emerges, for aesthetic experience is now no longer just a mode of judgment, but the framing of logical opposites where $p$ appears as $not-p$. Since this framing of opposites can occur anywhere where there is a separation of “sense” from “sense” (i.e. a disjunction between a perceived body and its meaning), any object or deed whatsoever can become “aesthetic” if we frame it as such. The result is the proliferation of the aesthetic in the sphere of the everyday and the development of artworks that could no longer comprehended under the traditional paradigms of the beautiful and the sublime. As Rancière puts it: a new regime of art has begun. In the next section, we will take a look at the consequences of this new regime.
Chapter 2.2 – The Dialectic of Art and Life

I.

In Letter XXVII, the concluding letter of the Ästhetische Briefe, Schiller describes how one might imagine humans first acquiring a taste for the aesthetic. At first, Schiller says, the taste for the aesthetic will be crude and barely distinguishable from sensuous pleasure. It might begin with the discovery of joy in things that are unusual and stimulating, in “das Neue und Ueberraschende, das Bunte, Abentheuerliche und Bizarre, das Heftige und Wilde” (TS 671). After this, Schiller continues, the desire for objects that are pleasing for perception will grow: people might begin to alter their appearances with jewelry and decorative apparels; then, they might begin transforming their tools (such as weapons of war) into objects that are both useful and pleasing in appearance; finally, they might begin to aestheticize their “innern Menschen” (i.e. their movements, their language, their voice, etc.) into something that could be pleasurably shared with other like-minded beings (TS 671-2).26 In this narrative, it appears that the aesthetic progresses in civilization from contingent encounters outside the sphere of the everyday to the willful aestheticization of everyday objects. As the taste for the aesthetic grows, Schiller seems to be saying, the desire to make things beautiful will also grow, until the aesthetic soon becomes all-pervasive and the production of beauty is normalized as an everyday cultural practice.

26 Schiller’s narrative here is an echo of Kant’s passage in §41 of the Third Critique (KdU 5:297), but there is an important difference in emphasis. Whereas Kant merely describes the progression from the production of objects that are impurely beautiful (i.e. beautiful objects that arouse interest) to objects that are purely beautiful (i.e. beautiful objects that arouse disinterested pleasure), Schiller highlights the process of aestheticization, i.e. the transformation of non-aesthetic objects into aesthetic objects, as a result of social development and increased empirical interest in the aesthetic.
Prima facie, Schiller’s speculative narrative sounds very much like an optimistic vision of progress. Indeed, the narrative ends in a fairytale-like fashion with what appears to be the triumph of sublimation as the desire for aesthetic pleasure eventually turns humanity towards love and moral virtue (“Das Bedürfniß zu gefallen unterwirft den Mächtigen des Geschmackes zartem Gericht […] Jetzt wird die Schwäche heilig, und die nicht gebändigte Stärke entehrt; das Unrecht der Natur wird durch die Großmut ritterlicher Sitten verbessert”) (TS 672-3). This optimism, however, needs to be taken with a more than a little grain of salt, since it clearly contradicts Schiller’s pessimistic diagnosis of civilization in Letter VI, which presents modern society as becoming increasingly fragmented and alienated from itself (TS 572-3). In fact, Schiller suggests in Letter X that great eras of art tend to flourish after ethical and political decline: he cites Periclean Greece, the early Roman Empire, the Abbasids, and Renaissance Italy as examples of aesthetic taste not being the cause of moral virtue but the after-effect of its deterioration (TS 590-1). Given such passages, it is difficult to see how there could be a positive correlation between art and moral virtue. We see a tension here in Schiller’s thought: on the one hand, he argues that the aesthetic condition is a necessary precondition of morality because it provides us with an experience of freedom that practical reason presupposes; on the other hand, he believes that human societies are only inclined to produce great works of art after freedom is no longer possible, i.e. in periods of ethical decay. These two strands of thought are not necessarily incompatible, but they require an explanation. If the aesthetic is a precondition of freedom, why does art tend to proliferate in conditions of unfreedom?
Schiller, unfortunately, does not provide us with clear answers. Though the Ästhetische Briefe purports to be a discourse on aesthetic education, the question of art and its effect on society is left frustratingly ambiguous. Schiller says at the end of Letter VI that there is a need for us to restore our totality as human beings (TS 578), but his subsequent discourse treats beauty either as a regulative ideal that can never become actual or as an experience that is so universal and primordial that art no longer seems to play an important role. Some commentators try to bridge the explanatory gap by suggesting that the function of art for Schiller is to educate the senses so that we become more attentive to particulars. Others argue that Schiller is more interested in the utopian promise of art than in its effects on our mental faculties, with some pointing out that the aesthetic opposes the very idea of improvement or perfectibility. These attempts at reconstructing Schiller’s

27 Since the early letters of the Ästhetische Briefe defends art as an important means to politics, many critics have assumed that Schiller wishes for society to be aestheticized, i.e. that Schiller valorizes the aesthetic as an ethical category. Schiller, however, never says that art is morally desirable or that it has a good effect on morality: he only contends that the aesthetic condition is a precondition of morality, which is a much more ambiguous claim.

28 Paul Guyer (2016), for example, argues that “Schiller's argument comes down to the claim that through the cultivation of our aesthetic sensibility we can learn to be attentive to detail and particularity as well as to principle and generality, and that being so attentive is a necessary condition for both theoretical and practical success.” There is not much textual evidence to support this reading, however, since Schiller never explicitly says that art improves sense reception.

29 Tom Huhn (2015) and Nathan Ross (2017) both argue along these lines. The former claims that aesthetic education for Schiller is the liberation that we experience from the determinations of sense and thought, and it is therefore “anything but the development of yet another capacity” (179). According to his reading, the “implicit message” that aesthetic experience teaches us is “that there is nothing distinctly human to be gained in the development of the capacities” (180). Human wholeness, in other words, does not consist in the development of the capacities (which is always partial and therefore oppressive), but in the suspension of these capacities. The utopian promise of non-domination here is not something that we progress towards: it is the abolishment of the need for progress, the suspension of the need to constantly strive towards perfection. We will revisit this idea again in Chapter 3 when we discuss the concept of the aesthetic human.
thoughts on art are necessarily speculative, however, since Schiller never explicitly tells us why we need art once we have already acquired the capacity for rational deliberation. Moreover, if the point of aesthetic education is to acquaint us with the aesthetic condition, why could we not just rely on natural (as opposed to artistic) beauty? Why bother building museum and concert halls when a charming scenery does the job just as well?

Schiller’s silence on the problem of art is compounded by the fact that there are strong reasons why we might want to distrust the arts. Plato, to cite the most famous example, argues in *The Republic* that art, defined broadly as the activity of *mīmesīs*, is by its nature politically subversive and therefore ought to be excluded from the ideal *polis* (except when regulated and employed for propagandistic purposes). In the twentieth century, as art became increasingly intertwined with mass culture, a number of Marxist and post-Marxist theorists have criticized aesthetic culture for unwittingly empowering the capitalist market system. The problem with art according to them is twofold:

1. In modern capitalist societies, the proliferation of the aesthetic results in commodity fetishism. This is because the aesthetic condition does not distinguish between art and non-art. In the aesthetic regime of the arts, anything can become aesthetic if it is framed as such. Urinals and Brillo boxes have no less right to be called aesthetic than the *Duino Elegies* or Beethoven’s late quartets. Banksy’s street art is just as aesthetic as Velazquez and Rembrandt when it disrupts conceptual thought. Even a pair of designer shoes could be regarded as aesthetic if the spectator views it with disinterested pleasure. Since the aesthetic condition depends solely on the spectator, it annihilates all
objective difference between the aesthetic and the ordinary. This allows the aesthetic to be distributed and consumed like any commercial product. The upshot is that the aesthetic ceases to exist in an autonomous sphere separate from the market machinery regulating everyday life. Seen in this light, art and life are in fact intertwined, while aesthetic autonomy is merely an illusion.

(2) The proliferation of the aesthetic is not a value-neutral phenomenon. Societies that value the aesthetic regard it as an end in itself separate from morality, politics, and socio-economic administration. Regarding the aesthetic as an end in itself, however, results in aestheticism, i.e. the valorization of the aesthetic at the expense of other values in the sphere of life. This is a problem because instead of generating interest in the social, the aesthetic encourages social disinterest. That leaves it open to the charge that it is a plaything of the rich, a distraction that keeps the privileged from having to confront the reality of human misery. Art achieves autonomy here at the expense of life. Seen in this light, art and life are fundamentally at odds.

Art, then, is a problem, and the problem has much to do with the aesthetic condition.

On the one hand, since the aesthetic condition does not provide us with an objective

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The idea that the aesthetic generates social disinterest is associated with Pierre Bourdieu, who argues in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979) that aesthetic judgment is the primary site where the “denegation of the social” takes place in modern society. Bourdieu, however, is merely rearticulating a familiar Marxist idea. Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) also argues that spectacles have made society become increasingly passive, docile, and incapable of revolutionary action. The idea is also found in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s analysis of the culture industry in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944), which argues that art qua commodity is an apparatus of capitalist control.
criterion to distinguish art from kitsch, art in modern society has an inherent tendency to degenerate into commodity, so that aesthetic experience loses its autonomy and merges with ordinary life. On the other hand, since the aesthetic condition is an experience of *disinterested* pleasure, art has a tendency to separate itself from the sphere of the everyday, drawing the spectator’s attention away from real-world social problems. Once again, the aesthetic condition generates a paradox: art is simultaneously too close and too far-removed from life. But how can art be both at once? To make sense of this contradiction, we need to return to Rancière.

II.

Towards the end of Letter XV of the *Ästhetische Briefe*, Schiller famously remarks that “der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch ist, und *er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt*” (*TS* 614). Shortly thereafter, he promises his reader that this statement will carry “das ganze Gebäude der ästhetischen Kunst und der noch schwürigern Lebenskunst” (*TS* 614). It is a grandiose promise. That both art and life should be founded on the idea of the human who plays: the historical impact of this vision, for good or for ill, has been immense.

In the essay “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes,” Rancière tries to trace the impact of Schiller’s promise on modern culture. He warns us, however, that we are dealing here not with the “influence” of a thinker but the “efficacy” of a plot that “reframes the division of the forms of our experience” (*DIS* 123). “How can the notion of ‘aesthetics’ as a specific experience,” he asks, “lead at once to the idea of a pure world of art and of the
self-suppression of art in life, to the tradition of avant-garde radicalism and to the aestheticization of common existence?” (DIS 124). How, in other words, can there be so many ways of understanding what art is based on such a vague formulation? “In a sense,” Rancière says,

the whole problem lies in a very small proposition. Schiller says that aesthetic experience will bear the edifice of the art of the beautiful and the art of the living. The entire question of the ‘politics of aesthetics’ – in other words, of the aesthetic regime of art – turns on this short conjunction. The aesthetic experience is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that and. It grounds the autonomy of art, to the extent that it connects it to the hope of ‘changing life.’ (DIS 124)

The key to figuring out how art and life can be simultaneously too close and too far-removed from one another lies in the ambiguous “and” of Schiller’s sentence. Rancière thinks this “and” shows us how aesthetic autonomy for Schiller is inherently heterogenous. Aesthetic experience, according to his reading, is only autonomous insofar as it is an event in the sphere of human praxis. This is counter-intuitive because appearance and meaning are supposed to be separate in the aesthetic regime. How can art affect life if it is mere appearance? Rancière’s answer is simple: art is not mere appearance. “[The] autonomy staged in the aesthetic regime of art,” he writes, “is not that of a work of art but of a mode of experience” (DIS 124-5). And “the object of that experience is ‘aesthetic,’ insofar as it is not, or at least not only, art” (DIS 125). Art is not mere appearance, in other words, because art is not only art. Aesthetic experience may be autonomous qua mode of
experience, but it is also the experience of a heterogeneity. Though autonomy is preserved in aesthetic experience, art itself is a double-agent: it has the power to affect life because it is life as well as art.

The example that Rancière uses to illustrate this peculiar double-logic of art is Schiller’s description of the Greco-Roman statue known as Juno Ludovisi in Letter XV of the Ästhetische Briefe. The depicted Juno, Schiller writes, appears self-contained and idle, as if there were no force or will behind the appearance (“In sich selbst ruhet und wohnt die ganze Gestalt, eine völlig geschlossene Schöpfung […] das ist keine Kraft, die mit Kräften kämpfte, keine Blöße, wo die Zeitlichkeit einbrechen könnte”) (TS 615). Rancière points out that this is not only a fitting description of the depicted Greco-Roman goddess, but also that of the statue itself, which looks as if it “has not been made [by an artist]” and “was never an object of will” (DIS 125). This, in fact, is the true source of the statue’s beauty. It is beautiful, not because it is the product of an artistic will, but because it was not intended as a work of art at all: it is simply the remains of a public monument, a work of craftsmanship that has lost its original meaning and become pure appearance because the figure it depicts is no longer a recognized deity. Beauty regarded this way is not the product of human will, but its absence. The Juno Ludovisi occasions an autonomous experience for the spectator because there is nothing behind its appearance: “The ‘free appearance’ stands in front of us, unapproachable, unavailable to our knowledge, our aims and desires,” says Rancière (DIS 125). What is autonomous here is the experience and not the artwork itself. The artwork itself is heterogenous: it is both pure appearance and a sign of something else. In this case, the Juno Ludovisi represents an idealized ancient Greek society: it is “the
appearance of a form of life in which art is not art […] a collective form of life that does not rend itself into separate spheres of activities, of a community where art and life, art and politics, life and politics are not severed from one another” (DIS 126). Now, whether this form of life ever existed in history does not matter. What matters is that “autonomy” no longer describes our experience of Juno Ludovisi here, but the form of life that created her. What is autonomous is no longer us, the spectator of an ancient statue, but them, the people who built this statue that we call “art” but which they call “life.” The Juno Ludovisi is therefore double: she is both art and non-art, both pure appearance and the congealed trace of a historical form of life. The operation of the aesthetic reveals itself here as the “doubling” of the object into a work of art and a product of life. It means that aesthetic experience is not merely an experience of the aesthetic, but an experience of the aesthetic that is on its way to becoming thought, to becoming a determinate sign. The work of art is here seen as both pure appearance and the sign of something else, hence it is double and is at once be both too close and too far-removed from the sphere of everyday life. As Rancière explains:

[The] original scene of aesthetics reveals a contradiction that is not the opposition of art versus politics, high art versus popular culture or art versus the aestheticization of life. All these oppositions are particular features and interpretations of a more basic contradiction. In the aesthetic regime of art, art is art to the extent that it is something else than art. It is always ‘aestheticized,’ meaning that it is always posited as a ‘form of life.’ (DIS 126)
Like the duck-rabbit *Kippfigur* that Wittgenstein made famous, art in the aesthetic regime can always be seen from two perspectives, as art and as non-art. This allows art and life to become intertwined while preserving their difference.

Now, the doubling of art into art and non-art tells us how art is *perceived*, not how it is *received*. As such, it can lead to different cultural practices depending on how one chooses to respond to art’s doubleness. “The key formula of the aesthetic regime of art is that art is an autonomous form of life,” Rancière writes, “This can be read in two different ways: autonomy can [be] valorized over life, or life over autonomy – and these lines of interpretation can be opposed, or they can intersect” (*DIS* 126). When producing or responding to a work of art, in other words, we are free to choose whether to privilege the autonomy of experience or the facticity of life, and whether to view them as interchangeable or as irreconcilably different. From this, Rancière concludes that there are “three major scenarios” that may result from the operation of the aesthetic: (1) art can become life, (2) life can become art, or (3) art and life can exchange properties (and either blur into one another or remain in separate spheres). Each of these scenarios deserve a quick description, for they show us how Schiller’s transformation of aesthetic experience into a unity of opposites can be applied to different projects, leading to a surprisingly large variety of historical outcomes.

*Outcome 1: Art becoming life.* In this scenario, aesthetic experience is not regarded as an end in itself, but as something inherently political, for it signifies a collective ethos that “promises a non-polemical, consensual framing of the common world” (*DIS* 127). As such, in this scenario, the aesthetic is not confined to traditional forms of art but can be
found in any phenomenon whatsoever that partakes in the aesthetic promise of collective framing. Rancière cites a number of examples from European intellectual history that convey this paradigm of thought. A text fragment associated with Hölderlin, Schelling, and Hegel (known as *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus*) argues that the task of poetry is to render ideas perceptible so that philosophy is made sensible and the people made rational, thus creating a “common experience shared by the elite and the common people” in society (*DIS* 127). Half a century later, Marx argued for a “human” revolution that would be “at once the consummation and abolition of philosophy,” for it would embody philosophy in material conditions that are shared by all human beings (*DIS* 128). Art becoming life, however, need not necessarily imply “the totalitarian figure of the collectivity as work of art” (*DIS* 128). Viewing society as a unified totality is one way of framing our shared intersubjective space, but the reframing of the common can take place in any field of human practice, even one as prosaic as furniture design. William Morris’ claim that “an armchair is beautiful if it provides a restful seat” is no less effective in reframing the world as a common sensorium than Mallarmé’s suggestion that the poet must recreate everything, “out of reminiscences, to show that we actually are at the place we have to be” (*DIS* 128). Similarly, attempts in modern architectural practice to “reduce all ornamentation to function, in the style of Adolf Loos,” or conversely, to “extol its autonomous signifying power, in the manner of Aloïs Riegl or Wilhelm Worringer,” all share the same principle that art is “a matter of dwelling in a common world” (*DIS* 129). Art becomes life in this scenario when it succeeds in bringing people to recognize each other as fellow dwellers of a shared space. Regarded this way, the aesthetic is inherently
ethical (it connects humans) and egalitarian (it treats all humans as members of the same sensus communis, regardless of social backgrounds).

**Outcome 2: Life becoming art.** In this scenario, art is not regarded as free appearance but as the residue of life, as the expression of “the vital spirit of a community” (*DIS* 130). The key characteristics of aesthetic experience (“the equivalence of activity and passivity, form and matter”) is transferred here onto the work of art itself, so that art becomes “an identity of consciousness and unconsciousness, of will and un-will” (*DIS* 131). We have already seen how this works in the example of the *Juno Ludovisi*, where the inexpressivity of the depicted figure is regarded as a symbol of unalienated life. Another example that Rancière cites is Hegel: according to Hegel, the Greek statue is the material embodiment of an idea of divinity that the people of Ancient Greece had, even if the person who made the statue is not conscious of this idea (for the idea only reveals itself through history). The Greek statue for Hegel is thus both the conscious expression of material form and the unconscious expression of a historical form of life. For art to be art in this sense, however, it must maintain its ambiguous double nature. When art becomes too conscious of itself as the expression of the heterogenous, it ceases to express the heterogenous, for the unconscious becomes part of the intention of the artwork. Hegel thinks this is what has become of art in modern bourgeois society, hence he famously argues that art has come to an end and is being replaced by philosophy. What brings Hegel to this conclusion, Rancière says, is the aesthetic premise that “when art ceases to be non-art, it is no longer art either” (*DIS* 132). The moment art becomes a self-reflective practice, it is merely art and therefore not truly art: it dissolves itself as such. Art in modern society is thus doomed to die and die
repeatedly. Rather than becoming a force in the sphere of everyday life, art in modern society negates itself to show its irreconcilably self-different nature. The schema of “life becoming art” thus typically results in two kinds of art: art that unconsciously expresses a historical form of life and art that consciously deconstructs itself as such.

**Outcome 3: Art and life exchanging properties (part 1).** In this scenario, the relationship between art and life is made more complex by “a multiplication of the temporalities of art” (*DIS* 133). Rather than reducing artworks to mere appearance or mere expressions of historical life, artworks are now regarded as “metamorphic elements” that “sleep and awaken” and are “prone to different reactualizations in accordance with new lines of temporality” (*DIS* 133). Art thus becomes an autonomous form of discourse that constantly renegotiate its material and reframe its history. Manet, for instance, might become “a painter of modern life” by creatively re-painting Velázquez and Titian (*DIS* 133). Other examples include Vico’s discovery of the ‘true’ Homer, Hegel’s re-evaluation of Dutch genre painting, Hölderlin’s reinvention of Greek tragedy, and Mendelssohn’s replaying of Bach’s *Matthäuspassion* (*POA* 25). It is not only traditional art forms, however, that are continuously “re-viewed, re-framed, re-read, re-made” (*DIS* 133). When Balzac describes a curiosity-shop filled with “old-fashioned furniture, gadgets and household goods” as “an endless poem” in *La Peau de chagrin*, he is also expressing a new mode of poetics that grants everyday objects the potential to be recognized as “a poetic object, a fabric of hieroglyphs, ciphering a history” (*DIS* 133-4). The moment an everyday object becomes “unavailable for everyday consumption,” it is available as art, as something that can be observed either as free appearance or as the trace of a form of life, thus “the
prose of everyday life becomes a huge, fantastic poem” (*DIS* 134). Earlier in this chapter, we had already mentioned how Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* celebrate the permeability between art and everyday objects, and how the Dada and Pop Art movements help further blur the boundaries between art and life. Another example Rancière mentions is Benjamin’s reading of the Parisian arcades as holding “the promise of the future” (*DIS* 134). There are countless other examples: just about every work of art in the post-Romantic era displays some form of complex temporality where art and life could be seen as exchanging properties. Not everyone, however views this as a sign of progress in aesthetic taste, for it results in the over-proliferation of the aesthetic, to the point where “nothing, however prosaic, escapes the domain of art” (*DIS* 136). Everything is reduced to spectacle: the sensorium of art and the sensorium of everyday life end up mirroring one another so completely that art can do little more than critique itself as a commodity (*DIS* 136). The desire to re-enchant the world ends up disenchanting the world – the more life is aestheticized, the more it is commodified, and we end up with the problem of kitsch. What began as a revolutionary gesture in the world of art ends up exhausting itself in postmodern gimmicks: the *Juno Ludovisi* is given over to archaeologists, only to be replaced with the neo-classical busts of Jeff Koons and his wife.

*Outcome 3: Art and life exchanging properties (part 2).* One way of avoiding kitsch is to insist on the separation of “high” art from the aestheticization of everyday life. To achieve this separation of art and life, however, while at the same acknowledging their capacity to exchange properties, requires the staging of a double heterogeneity: art as free appearance and art as aestheticization must be displayed as two irreconcilably different
modes of perception. Schönberg’s music (as presented by Adorno in \textit{Philosophie der neuen Musik}) is an example of this technique: “in order to denounce the capitalist division of labour and the adornments of commodification, it has to take that division of labour yet further, to be still more technical, more ‘inhuman’ than the products of capitalist mass production […] this inhumanity, in turn, makes the stain of what has been repressed appear and disrupt the work’s perfect technical arrangement” (DIS 137). Schönberg’s music, in other words, reveals its aesthetic autonomy by being uncompromisingly unfree in its composition: the more “technical” it becomes, the more effective it is at making manifest the gulf between art \textit{qua} appearance (which is free) and art \textit{qua} life (which is dominated by techniques of mastery). Flaubert does something similar when, in addition to criticizing the aestheticization of life through the plot of \textit{Madame Bovary} (where the title character is cruelly punished for trying to live the life of a novel-heroine), he makes the author disappear from the text by rendering the prose of his novel “indistinguishable from that of his characters, the prose of everyday life” (DIS 137). “In order to trace the border-line separating his art from that of his character,” Rancière reflects, “[Flaubert’s] prose had to go overboard on the muteness of common life” (DIS 175). Both Flaubert and Schönberg believe that the separation of art from everyday life rests largely on the former’s capacity to be even more deprived of “poetry” than the latter. Art must show itself to be exceptionally cold and cruel so as to reveal how its only difference from the common sensorium of the everyday is its capacity to \textit{repeat} this sensorium (with vehemence). This logic, when pushed all the way, leads to the production of artworks that are difficult to
enjoy and comprehend. The problem of kitsch is overcome, only for the problem of avantgarde elitism to appear in its stead.

The outcomes outlined above illustrate how the concept of the aesthetic condition has altered the way art is practiced in society. By re-defining aesthetic experience as the experience of a sensible heterogeneity where p is not-p, Schiller makes it possible for any object to be regarded as aesthetic in the spheres of art and life. The resulting tension and interplay between these two spheres is what drives modern art to become what it has become: a hodge-podge of kitsch and avantgarde artifacts that simultaneously proclaim the death of art and its continued persistence. Whether this hodge-podge of kitsch and avantgarde artifacts is desirable for society is unclear: this lack of clarity, however, is precisely what sustains modern aesthetic practice.

One important category of modern art that remains unmentioned in the narrative above is the work of art that purports to be “ethical witnesses to the unrepresentable” (DIS 139). This category of art does not fit the paradigm of the aesthetic, for it introduces an ethical dimension into the practice of art, an ethical dimension that is in large part a response to the unspeakable horrors of Auschwitz. Rancière characterizes the ethical principle that guides artworks of this kind as “the hard ethics of infinite evil and of an art devoted to the interminable mourning of irremediable catastrophe” (DIS 208). He cites Lyotard as an example of this “ethical” tradition: according to Lyotard, art after Auschwitz has a responsibility to reject the “dream of humanity that is master of itself” and must instead become a testimony to the “dependence of the Spirit as regards the Other” (DIS 190). Rather than focusing on the beautiful, Lyotard argues that the paradigm of
contemporary art should be – and is in fact already – an updated version of the Kantian sublime, which he characterizes as the experience of spirit being forced “to pursue the impossible task of approaching matter, of seizing the sensible in its singularity” (DIS 206). 31 The failure of spirit’s capacity to grasp matter in its singularity is supposed to be a reflection of human non-mastery, of our inevitable dependence on the law of the Other (which Lyotard compares to the Freudo-Lacanian “Thing”). Art from this perspective should repeat the gesture of our failure to grasp or represent the world in its totality, of our ultimate incapacity to make sense of sensible objects. In a way, Rancière says, the ethics of the Lyotardian sublime is the opposite of the emancipatory politics normally associated with the aesthetic tradition. “In the tradition of Adorno,” writes Rancière,

[Lyotard] summons the avant-garde to retrace indefinitely the line separating artworks proper from the impure mixtures of culture and communication. The aim, however, is no longer to preserve the promise of emancipation. On the contrary, it is to attest indefinitely to the immemorial

31 Technically, the Kantian sublime by its nature cannot be ascribed to a work of art, since it is a phenomenon that is entirely contained within the subject (unlike beauty, it does not refer to an external form). In fact, as Rancière points out in “The Sublime from Lyotard to Schiller: Two readings of Kant and their political significance,” the Lyotardian sublime is closer to Kant’s concept of the beautiful, since it “aims at giving matter the properties that Kant gives only to aesthetic form” (9). The problem with Lyotard’s distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, at least as it appears in works such as The Inhuman: Reflections on Time, is that it falsely characterizes the former as the coming together of matter and spirit, in contrast to the “disaster” of rupture that occurs in the latter. Rancière is right here to criticize Lyotard for misrepresenting Kant. According to Kant’s analysis, the rupture between matter and spirit already occurs in our cognition of the beautiful, since “the chief property of aesthetic form is its unavailability” and the “form” that we cognize in such judgments is “precisely not a conceptual form imposing its law to the manifold of sensation” (9). What Lyotard calls the “sublime,” in other words, is simply ordinary aesthetic judgment, with the chief difference that Lyotard adds an ethical dimension to it: he transforms the rupture between sense and concepts into what Rancière calls “the sheer inscription of alienation, an enslavement of the soul that cannot be repressed” (12). This dramatization of rupture, it hardly needs to be said, is entirely foreign to Kant’s philosophical system.
alienation that transforms every promise of emancipation into a lie that will only ever be achieved in the form of infinite crime, art’s answer to which is put up a ‘resistance’ that is nothing but the endless work of mourning. (DIS 208)

Given the horrors of the twentieth century, the desire to transform art into a work of mourning is completely understandable. There is no reason, however, why this conception of art must be the only paradigm of art in today’s world. As Rancière points out: “the ethical turn is not an historical necessity, for the simple reason that there is no such thing” (DIS 209).32 Art can come in many forms. Bearing witness to an unrepresentable catastrophe is one way of approaching art. The paradigm of the aesthetic is another. Both asserts, in different ways, the principle of human non-mastery. There is no reason why both cannot co-exist.

32 Rancière in fact identifies two “violent theoretical gestures” in the ethical demand that all arts having to do with the Holocaust must invoke the unrepresentable: “First, religious interdiction must be introduced into art by transforming the prohibition on representing the Jewish God into the impossibility of representing the extermination of the Jewish people. Second, the surplus of representation inherent in the ruin of the representative order must be transformed into its opposite: a lack or an impossibility of representation” (DIS 198). In contrast to those who make such ethical demands on the arts, Rancière argues that there are responsible ways to make art about the Nazi concentration camps that does not boil down to making moral gestures. Claude Lanzmann’s film Shoah, for example, according to Rancière, uses narrative representation to stage the unbridgeable gulf between the organization of the camp and the fact that it is used to generate “an event beyond any cause that could be rationally reconstructed” (DIS 197). This, Rancière says, is not an invocation of the unrepresentable but a mode of narrative that dispenses with the need for developmental arcs and character motivation, which would have been highly inappropriate for this subject matter. “An anti-representative art is not an art that no longer represents,” he writes. “It is an art whose choice of representable subjects and means of representation is no longer limited” (DIS 197). Lanzmann’s Shoah, in short, does not dispense with representation, but with the representative regime of the arts: it uses representation in a new way to establish how the Holocaust is an event beyond rational understanding.
In the next section (Chapter 2.3), we will investigate the politics of aesthetic experience in more detail. Before we move on, however, it is important to take at least a cursory glance at Schiller’s non-theoretical works to see if the concept of the aesthetic condition also plays an important role there. It is generally agreed that Schiller’s theoretical writings should not be read in isolation from his poetry or vice versa, the assumption being that their ideas are supposed to agree and reinforce one another. In fact, some scholars have argued that Schiller’s fictional works are in some ways a much better embodiment of Schiller’s philosophy than his theoretical writings. In the introduction to *Schiller as Philosopher*, Beiser argues that “[t]here is indeed an important sense in which Schiller’s deepest philosophy comes not from his essays but from his plays and poems” (10). Unfortunately, the claim that Schiller’s poetry embodies his philosophy of art is highly problematic if we wish to treat the former as aesthetic objects, for the aesthetic condition dictates that there is no connection between appearance and meaning in the work of art. If Schiller’s plays and poems are aesthetic in the way that Schiller defines the term, they cannot be regarded as expressions of his or anyone else’s philosophy, since that would establish an illegitimate connection between signifier and signified, and there would no longer be a heterogeneity of the sensible. Still, it is possible that some of Schiller’s fictional writings might thematize the aesthetic condition in an indirect way. The aesthetic condition, after all, need not be explained: it can also be *shown*. To show the aesthetic condition, however, is to show the heterogeneity of the sensible, and that means revealing a mismatch between meaning and appearance, between our capacity to sense and our capacity to make sense. But to show this mismatch is to force thought into “the impossible
task of approaching matter, of seizing the sensible in its singularity,” which is precisely the experience of the Lyotardian sublime. Ironically, the desire to make the spectator confront the concept of the aesthetic yields an outcome that is entirely non-aesthetic: instead of seeing the artwork as free appearance, the spectator is confronted with its own incapacity to master the resistance of the material, thus becoming ethical witnesses of the unrepresentable. The gap between Schiller and Lyotard is not as wide as it might seem at first glance. Many of Schiller’s poems poorly embodies the paradigm of the aesthetic, but they are exemplary works of mourning. One such example, the poem that we shall confront below, is “Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais.”

III.

“Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais” is a blank verse narrative poem that Schiller composed shortly after the completion of the Ästhetische Briefe. It was first published in Die Horen, the famous literary journal of the Weimarer Klassik, in the year 1795. The work has not received much scholarly attention, perhaps because it appears to be one of those didactic lyrics meant for Gymnasium students rather than a serious work of literature. There is some truth to this: the work is meant to be popular and is presented in a straightforward, uncomplicated verse. Despite its apparent simplicity, however, the poem has no clear message: it presents the reader with a puzzle that means different things to different people. When it was first published in Die Horen, many readers at the time did not know how to react. Christian Gottfried Körner, for instance, wrote Schiller on September 2, 1795 that the poem “hat treffliche Darstellung; aber der Stoff hat für mich etwas Dunkles und
Unbefriedigendes.” Herder’s response was even stronger, albeit of a different kind. He wrote to Schiller on August 22, 1795 saying: “Über das ‘Bild zu [Sais]’ möchte ich mit Ihnen hadern. Durst nach Wahrheit ist nie Schuld […] Lassen Sie den armen Jungen, der sich in die Rotonde schleicht, vom Anblick der Wahrheit, wenn sie sich in dieser Macht den Schleier wider Willen darf heben lassen, toll oder gar zerschmettert werden […] nur dies Priesterverbot, und die Schuld, die es wirken soll – damit habe ich nichts zu schaffen.”

Whatever the merit of this poem as a work of literature, it certainly has the power to provoke and irritate Schiller’s contemporaries. Their negative reactions, I want to suggest, are not completely unwarranted, for the poem is designed to be uncanny in a way that is hard to reconcile with Körner’s and Herder’s optimistic faith in the Aufklärung.

“Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais” tells the story of an Egyptian youth who thirsts for knowledge and wants to uncover the “[g]eheime Weisheit” of his religion (ln. 1-3). At the beginning of the poem, the youth declares that “die Wahrheit” is not something that can be obtained through partial knowledge but must instead be possessed as an undivided whole: “Nimm einen Ton aus einer Harmonie, / Nimm eine Farbe aus dem Regenbogen, / Und alles, was dir bleibt, ist nichts, solang / Das schöne All der Töne fehlt und Farben,” he tells the hierophant (ln. 14-17). The youth, in other words, conceives of “Wahrheit” as an absolute, indivisible totality: if what we know is mere partial knowledge, it is mere appearance and not “Wahrheit”; to seek “Wahrheit” one must grasp the absolute point of view, the point of view where everything hangs together as a whole. Unfortunately for the youth, the “Wahrheit” of his religion is veiled, literally, for it is described as “ein verschleiert Bild von Riesengröße” (ln. 20). The hierophant warns the youth that no mortals
may lift the veil of this hidden “Bild” before he does so himself. Nevertheless, he admits to the youth (fatally, as it turns out) that “wer mit ungeweihter schuld’ger Hand / Den heiligen verbotnen früher hebt, / Der […] sieht die Wahrheit” (ln. 30-2). Two things are worth pointing out from this mysterious statement. First, the hierophant says that the “Wahrheit” will be seen, not grasped, when the veil is lifted: it suggests that the truth is only accessible for the perception and not the understanding. Second, the hand that lifts the veil is described by the hierophant as “schuldig” or guilty, which implies that it must have committed a crime or transgressed the law. The association of guilt and truth is stressed again in the next stanza. When the youth remarks: “Das faß ich nicht. Wenn von der Wahrheit / Nur diese dünne Scheidewand mich trennte – ” (ln. 36-7), the hierophant immediately interjects: “Und ein Gesetz” (ln. 38). What separates the youth from the truth, the hierophant’s statement suggests, is not the physical veil covering the image, but the law. It implies that the hiddenness of the veiled truth is not a metaphysical fact, but a consequence of human customs (the word “Gesetz,” it is worth reminding, is derived from “setzen,” i.e. the setting up or positing of something). The youth is denied access to truth so long as he is bound by the law. To reach or unveil the truth, he must transgress the law, which entails committing a crime and becoming “schuldig.” Hence truthfulness and lawfulness are opposites: whatever “Wahrheit” is, it is beyond the realm of human customs.

Predictably, the youth’s curiosity eventually gets the better of him. In the middle of the night, he manages to sneak his way to the veiled image without being seen by the hierophant. After a momentary struggle with the voice of his conscience, he lifts the veil and shouts: “Ich will sie schauen!” There follows a long, mocking echo of “Schauen!”
What does the youth see behind the veil? We do not know. Instead of telling us what he sees, the poem leaves us listening to the echo of his voice. The truth is unveiled, and yet there is no revelation: all we get is an absence of seeing and the repetition of a word expressing the desire to see. The final stanza reports that the youth is found “besinnungslos und bleich” (ln. 76) the next morning, all joy (“Heiterkeit”) drained out of him (ln. 81). He dies an early death soon after, but before he does so, he warns those who would hear him: “Weh dem, der zu der Wahrheit geht durch Schuld, / Sie wird ihm nimmermehr erfreulich sein” (ln. 85-6). The notion of “Schuld” returns. But what to make of the ending? Why is the unveiling of the truth so devastating for the youth? It will not do to speculate that the youth has discovered some particular truth about the human condition, e.g. the inevitability of death, since that would reduce the truth to a mere knowledge of facts rather than the viewpoint of the absolute.\(^{33}\) The truth that the youth uncovers remains concealed in the end for the reader. This lack of proper resolution made Körner felt uneasy and one can see why: besides the superficial atmosphere of mystery, the word “truth” is without meaning in this poem. It is a sign missing in signification. The truth manifests itself in the poem as an absence: it is present as hiddenness. We do not get to see the truth except as that which lies beyond the visible. We do not get to hear the truth except as that long mysterious echo that follows and mocks the spoken word. Perhaps the youth saw nothing there. Perhaps what he saw was an absence of image or the truth of negative theology. The point, however, is not what the youth saw, but what we do not see. Behind the veil of narrative that Schiller

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\(^{33}\) Benno von Wiese makes this mistake in his interpretation of the poem. By equating truth with death, he turns Schiller’s ballad into a poem about mortality, thus ignoring the whole problematic of knowledge and concealment that the narrative carefully sets up. See von Wiese, p. 605.
constructs, the truth of the poem (i.e. its meaning or concept) is unavailable for our interpretive gaze. Yet the truth is present in the poem as that which exceeds representation, as that which is always hidden and therefore sublime. The poem thus displays its “Wahrheit” as the revelation of a concealment. It disrupts our desire for meaning to show that there is nothing behind the surface narrative, that what unifies the narrative is just our desire to see beyond.

And what about the association of truth with Schuld that Herder found so irritating? The hierophant makes it clear that the “Scheidewand” between the youth and the truth involves “ein Gesetz” (ln. 37-8). Significantly, the hierophant is described in this passage as a “Führer” (ln. 38), which suggests that he is the source of authority behind the “Gesetz” he mentions (the fact that he is allowed to lift the veil before the youth is another evidence of his authority). Before the youth transgresses the law by lifting the veil, it is the hierophant who controls what the youth gets to see or hear: his power stems from his ability to grant and withhold access to the truth. The hierophant admits that he himself has never tried to unveil the image (ln. 35-6). And why would he? The concealment of the truth is

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34 Schiller associates the feeling of terror and hiddenness with the sublime. In “Vom Erhabenen” (1803), he writes: “Alles, was verhüllt ist, alles Geheimnisvolle, trägt zum Schrecklichen bei und ist deswegen der Erhabenheit fähig” (TS 417). Kant also connects the sublime with the feeling of terror, but unlike Schiller, he does not include hiddenness as one of the main characteristics of the sublime. In Kant’s philosophical system, the distinction between the mathematical and dynamical sublimes is meant to be exhaustive. Although he says that there is nothing more sublime than the commandment in the Jewish Book of the Law, which states that no image should be made of that which is in heaven, on the earth, or under the earth (KdU 5:274), and although he writes in a footnote in §49 that nothing is more sublime than the inscription over the temple of Isis, which says “Ich bin alles was da ist, was da war, und was da sein wird, und meinen Schleier hat kein Sterblicher aufgedeckt” (KdU 5:316), he seems to view these as instances of the mathematical sublime (where something is of such magnitude that it exceeds our capacity for aesthetic comprehension) rather than as instances of das Geheimnisvolle.
what sustains the law, which in turn is the source of his power: to unveil the truth would be to unravel the power dynamics that makes him a hierophant and the youth a mere apprentice. Suppose this were to happen – what would follow? If the truth were unveiled, the mysteries would be removed and there would be no longer be any need for initiation rites or apprenticeship. The social hierarchy that distinguishes the hierophant from the youth would vanish and there would no longer be a mystery cult: both the youth’s and the hierophant’s practical identities would become meaningless. The burden of “Schuld” is the burden of a subject that have rejected all laws to become an aimless, uncanny entity. This seems to be why the youth loses all “Heiterkeit” at the end of the poem. Without truth’s concealment, there is no room left for intellectual curiosity: everything is revealed and the desire that once animated the youth – “des Wissens brennende Begier” (ln. 43) that made him a “Wagende[r]” (ln. 45) – is extinguished in the process. The price of the youth’s revelation is the will to life. It is a heavy price, indeed, much too heavy. If there is a didactic message to be found in this poem, it is a warning against believing blindly in the Aufklärung: the revelation of truth, the poem seems to say, is not a condition of life, for what makes a form of life possible (i.e. the Law) is the result of truth’s concealment.

But the message goes both ways. If revelation leads to the annihilation of motivation and agency, then concealment leads to political domination for it creates hierarchy, generates laws, and controls the behavior of the people. The “Gesetz” is the “Scheidewand” that separates those who have access to knowledge from those who do not, thus dividing society into two classes: the masters and the mastered. We are left with a choice between Scylla and Charybdis: either the truth is concealed and power is arbitrarily
given to those who control its access, or the truth is revealed and we lose the “Heiterkeit” that sustains our will to life. About a century after Schiller’s poem was written, Nietzsche would revisit the trope of the Egyptian youth and declare his preference for “Heiterkeit” over revelation. In the preface to the second edition of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, he writes:

> Wir wissen Einiges jetzt zu gut, wir Wissenden: oh wie wir nunmehr lernen, gut zu vergessen, gut nicht-zu-wissen, als Künstler! Und was unsere Zukunft betrifft: man wird uns schwerlich wieder auf den Pfaden jener ägyptischen Jünglinge finden, welche Nachts Tempel unsicher machen, Bildsäulen umarmen und durchaus Alles, was mit guten Gründen verdeckt gehalten wird, entschleiern, aufdecken, in helles Licht stellen wollen. Nein, dieser schlechte Geschmack, dieser Wille zur Wahrheit, zur “Wahrheit um jeden Preis,” dieser Jünglings-Wahnsinn in der Liebe zur Wahrheit – ist uns verleidet: dazu sind wir zu erfahren, zu ernst, zu lustig, zu gebrannt, zu tief... Wir glauben nicht mehr daran, dass Wahrheit noch Wahrheit bleibt, wenn man ihr die Schleier abzieht; wir haben genug gelebt, um dies zu glauben.

(*KSA* 3.352)

Schiller may be more ambivalent towards truth’s concealment than Nietzsche, but he seems to agree that truth should not be desired “um jeden Preis.” The final message of Schiller’s poem, however, remains unclear. Unlike Nietzsche, Schiller does not attempt to challenge his readers to overcome themselves or to abandon the Platonic conception of truth as that which lies behind appearance. His poem merely stages a rupture in the desire for meaning
as a scene of sublime uncanniness, but the choice between “Heiterkeit” and “Wahrheit,”
between surface pleasure and the unveiling of the hidden, is left unresolved.

And rightly so, for Schiller’s poem is not concerned with the re-evaluation of truth,
but with the representation of the aesthetic. Its primary goal is to reveal to the reader how
sense-presentation and sense-making might come apart, how they need not be one. It does
this by proceeding in three stages. First, it gives us a representation that we are able to
perceive, for it tells us the story of a young Egyptian youth that can we imagine with our
mind’s eye. Then, at a crucial point in the narrative, when the image of Sais is revealed as
a concealment, the poem disrupts the reader’s sense-making process by displaying an
absence of meaning that disunifies the narrative as a whole. (At this point, an unbridgeable
gap opens up between the signifier and the signified, thus generating a feeling of
uncanniness in the reader.) Finally, in the third stage, as the poem draws to a close, the
reader becomes aware that the disruption of their sense-making procedure has meaning on
a meta-narrative level, for the reader’s desire to lift the narrative veil has obvious parallels
to the curiosity of the Egyptian youth. The concept of the aesthetic as a heterogeneity of
the sensible is thus shown to the reader by way of the sublime, by the failure of thought to
approach the singularity of sense as it attempts to cognize and make sense of the text. The
fact that this particular idea of the aesthetic is communicated to the reader, however, means
that the poem is no longer free qua appearance. The poem dissolves itself as free
appearance to become a representation of the aesthetic condition. Paradoxically, the poem
succeeds in teaching us about the aesthetic condition by becoming didactic and therefore
non-aesthetic. Its success in conveying knowledge guarantees its failure as a work of art.
In the aesthetic regime, art and knowledge do not mix. The operation of the aesthetic demands the complete severance of meaning from appearance. The moment a work of art attempts to convey knowledge or express an ethical gesture, it is no longer a work of art in the sense described by Schiller in the *Ästhetische Briefe*. “Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais,” when read in the way that I have outlined above, is not a good example of art in the aesthetic regime, but it is a good representation of Schiller’s aesthetic theory, for it does a great job critiquing artwork that purports to convey knowledge. Schiller’s poem exposes the machinery of hidden meaning as a hierarchical system that puts the spectator in a position of ignorance while the author is elevated to the position of the hierophant. To view a work of art as a veiled image is to generate a hierarchy in the act of perception, for it creates a “Scheidewand” between knowers and non-knowers, between those who are in a position of mastery and those who are mastered. The aesthetic regime seeks to abolish this hierarchy in favor of equality: it proposes not just a new way of looking, but also a new way of relating subjects to a common sensorium. In the aesthetic regime, the aesthetic is never merely aesthetic: it is always political. How the aesthetic implicates the political, however, is a matter that requires further investigation.

Chapter 2.3 – Redistribution and Emancipation

I.

Perceptual experience for Rancière is never just a matter of perception: it always has an unavoidable political dimension, for it brings into play a network of intersubjective relations that binds a community of perceivers to the sensorium of the perceived. We have
already seen one model of this network of intersubjective relations in Schiller’s poem, “Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais.” Schiller’s narrative about the Egyptian youth who uncovers the veiled image of Sais depicts a community of perceivers grounded in a hierarchy separating those with access to the truth from those without. In this community of perceivers, not everyone is equal. Even the youth’s lifting of the veil fails to bring about equality, for the loss of “Heiterkeit” that he experiences in the end suggests that any transgression of the law separating privileged and non-privileged perceivers will annihilate one’s way of life. It is a pessimistic narrative: it suggests that perception is grounded in inequality and that any attempt to disturb the “truth” behind this inequality will result in the unraveling of ethical life.

There are other ways of interpreting Schiller’s poem, however. Although a strand of pessimism could be detected in many of Schiller’s writings, Beiser is right to claim that there is a “dimension to Schiller’s thinking which makes it impossible to force him into a pessimistic mold” (“Schiller and Pessimism” 93). Indeed, if we take into account how Schiller portrays the Egyptian youth as inexperienced and naïve, it is clear that the youth’s reaction to the unveiling of the image of Sais does not represent the human condition. Nothing about the poem suggests that a different outcome is impossible; nothing precludes another character with another set of dispositions from unveiling the image without losing “Heiterkeit.” One possible reaction to the unveiling of the image, for example, might be laughter: Nietzsche’s reference to the myth of Baubo in the preface of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* shows us that there is a comic alternative to the tale of the Egyptian youth (KSA 3:352). The myth of Baubo unveiling herself to provoke Persephone to laugh and
forget her grief shows us how our attitude towards unfulfilled longing can be changed. By conceding that the truth is better left veiled, however, Nietzsche may have conceded too much, for without the unveiling of mystery, nothing can challenge the power structure of the status quo. Indeed, Nietzsche is happy to preserve the hierarchical relationship between knowers and non-knowers: perception for him remains grounded in the fact that knowledge is distributed unevenly between those who have the capacity to see and those who do not. In the end, Die fröhliche Wissenschaft is a book for the chosen few, for free spirits and philosophers of the future who not only “knows” but also has the strength to withstand tragic knowledge. The ignorant masses, in those few occasions when they are mentioned at all, are treated as objects of contempt. In Nietzsche’s eyes, the knowers alone are the ones who count.

But why should they be the only ones who count? And who is the one doing the counting? So long as the veil of mystery exists, there will always be a “Scheidewand” separating those who count from those who do not. Without it, however, there would be neither hierarchy nor status difference. The cult would have nothing to worship or organize themselves around. Two ways of doing politics are at play here: on the one hand, the veil is that which makes politics possible, for it generates hierarchies and enables political administration; on the other hand, the lifting of the veil could be regarded as a political act – perhaps the only genuinely political act – for in disrupting the machinery of hidden knowledge, it temporarily suspends hierarchy, illegitimately redistributing knowledge to those who should not know and should not count. Politics in the latter sense is disruptive
yet potentially also constructive. It might lead to the loss of a way of life, but it could also lead to the formation of a new one.

The distinction between these two kinds of politics is a central feature of Rancière’s political thought. To prevent confusion, he uses the term “the police” to designate the former category of politics (i.e. the administrative machine that dictates what is knowable or visible) and only uses the term “politics” to refer to the latter (i.e. the disruption of this administrative machine). Rancière stresses, however, that these categories are not to be viewed in black and white terms. Despite the ominous-sounding name, the “police” is not meant to be associated with twentieth-century totalitarian regimes: it is simply that which makes divisions possible, and divisions are ultimately what makes things come into view. Without the police, there is no partitioning and therefore nothing to participate in. Without the police, there is no form of life. “The essence of the police,” Rancière writes in *Ten Theses on Politics*,

lies neither in repression nor even in control over the living. Its essence lies in a certain way of dividing up the sensible. [...] This partition should be understood in the double sense of the word: on the one hand, as that which separates and excludes; on the other, as that which allows participation. A partition of the sensible refers to the manner in which a relation between a shared common (un commun partagé) and the distribution of exclusive parts is determined in sensory experience. This latter form of distribution, which, by its sensory self-evidence, anticipates the distribution of parts and shares
(parties), itself presupposes a distribution of what is visible and what not, of what can be heard and what cannot. (*DIS* 44)

Thus the regime of the police does two things: (1) it *gives* us a common sensible, a world where things are distributed into parts and shares, and (2) it allows us to *take part* in this common sensible, i.e. it gives us roles to play. Unfortunately, since every act of partitioning is also an act of exclusion, there will always an “other” left out of the prescribed frame.

The order that the police institutes does not distribute power evenly, for in telling us what counts, it also tells us what does not. Every ordering system generates entities that fail to fit. To abolish this, we need politics to challenge the distribution of parts. “Politics, before all else,” Rancière writes, “is an intervention in the visible and the sayable […] It is the instituting of a dispute over the distribution of the sensible, over the *nemein* that founds every *nomos* of the community” (*DIS* 45).35 “Political activity reconfigures the distribution of the perceptible,” he explains in another essay. “It introduces new objects and subjects onto the common stage. It makes visible what was invisible, it makes audible as speaking beings those who were previously heard only as noisy animals” (PL 4). If the veil of Sais

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35 Politics for Rancière, it should be emphasized, is not the same things as political *interest*. In fact, and this explains why there is always an ineliminable aesthetic dimension to politics, politics is always the opposite of political interest, for interest implies specific demands of how things should be, but the desire for a new partition of the sensible belongs in realm of politics only if it is indeterminate, i.e. does not project specific orderings of shares and parts. The moment a political desire is identified with a specific ordering of shares and parts, it becomes a policing force – the political disappears the moment there is a determinate political aim. As Rancière himself puts it: “[Politics] has no proper place nor any natural subjects. A demonstration is political not because it occurs in a particular place and bears upon a particular object but rather because its form is that of a clash between two partitions of the sensible. A political subject is not a group of interests or of ideas, but the operator of a particular *dispositif* of subjectivation and litigation through which politics comes into existence. A political demonstration is therefore always of the moment and its subjects are always precarious. A political difference is always on the shore of its own disappearance: the people are always close to sinking into the sea of the population or of the race; the proletariat is always on the verge of being confused with workers defending their interests […]” (*DIS* 47).
is an emblem of the police, i.e. that which creates an order through the separation of parts, then the lifting of the veil is an instance of politics, i.e. that which disrupts the separation of parts, forcing their redistribution in the common sensible. In the end, they are two sides of the same coin, for just as every veil has the potential to be lifted, every regime of the police has the potential to be disrupted through politics. The actual is persistently haunted by the potential for redistribution: this is the thought that unifies Schiller and Rancière as thinkers of the aesthetic.

Politics, however, is not just a potential: it is also the actualization of the human essence, for in disrupting the status quo, the subject manifests itself as a subject, i.e. as a being capable of using logos to stage its difference from others. “Whoever is in the presence of an animal that possesses the ability to articulate language and its power of demonstration, knows that he is dealing with a human – and therefore political – animal,” Rancière writes (DIS 45). In other words, to be human for Rancière is to be political, for the essence of both is the capacity to use language. If perception for Rancière is never just a matter of perception, it is because we are linguistic and therefore political animals. So long as we have the capacity to use language, no distribution of sense is above dispute and no regime of the visible is a fixed given. “The given on which politics rests is always litigious,” Rancière insists (PL 3). Politics, like the specter of revolution, haunts perception as an ever-present potential for sense redistribution. And every time we redistribute sense, we are actualizing that which is always already a potential in us – it matters not whether we call it Humanity, logos, God, or the Absolute.36

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36 Rancière is careful, however, not to turn our basic capacity for disagreement into an ontological absolute. Responding to his critics, whom he thinks have a tendency to infinitize our originary
But how is this connected to aesthetic experience? What has our experience of art got to do with the redistribution of sense? We have seen how perception according to Rancière’s analysis has an inherent political dimension. What we have not yet seen, however, is how this political dimension emerges out of our experience of the aesthetic. To complete our inquiry of the aesthetic condition, the politics of aesthetic experience needs to be brought to light. Once again, we will use Rancière to guide our re-thinking of Schiller. As such, we will begin with Rancière’s analysis of spectating (section II), proceed to his thoughts on writing (section III), then conclude with an original reading of one of Schiller’s poems (section IV).

II.
What is spectating? What is it that we are doing when we observe a spectacle? Since at least the time of Plato, spectating is often thought to be the opposite of knowing and acting. On the one hand, it is thought to be the opposite of knowing because its object is appearance.
rather than the cause of the appearance. The theater spectator, for example, is not expected to know how a scene is produced: she is expected to enjoy the surface illusion and leave its production to the experts behind the scene. On the other hand, spectating is thought to be the opposite of acting because it is thought to be passive. The theater spectator is not expected to do something: she is expected stay in her seat, watching events on the stage unfold from a safe and unobtrusive distance. Spectating, then, seems to encourage both ignorance and docility. It is little wonder that Plato’s Socrates argues for the theater to be banned from the ideal republic. And he is not alone in this. Even passionate defenders of the theater agree that spectating is problematic: to save the theater, they argue, we have to transform it into a non-spectating institution. Brecht’s epic theater and Artaud’s theater of cruelty are two well-known ways of accomplishing this: the former turns the theater into a space for critical reflection (by making the audience confront social problems), the latter turns it into a space for the creation of vital energies (by immersing the audience in intoxicating rites). In both cases, the theater cancels itself out as a space for spectating: critical thought and bodily intoxication have become the new goals of performance.

Is this criticism of spectating fair, though? Is spectating really the opposite of knowing and acting? Much depends on the validity of the binary oppositions underlying Plato’s criticism of spectacle: reality versus appearance, activity versus passivity, knowledge versus sensation, etc. Since life is often associated with the first terms of these binaries (i.e. reality, activity, and knowledge), while spectating is associated only with the second terms, it is inevitable to draw the conclusion that spectating is the opposite of living. Indeed, if we push the thought just a little further, we could blame spectacles for all sorts
of social ills. Debord famously characterizes modern society as a “society of the spectacle,” where the masses passively accept whatever the culture industry hands to them. The phrase continues to resonate today because spectacles are more present than ever before: in an age where memes and viral videos have replaced responsible journalism, it is not difficult to blame spectacles for political polarization and the election of reality-TV presidents.

But what if the act of spectating itself is not problematic? What if the problem lies in the way in which we relate spectating to other activities? In The Emancipated Spectator (2009), Rancière argues that the problem with spectating has nothing to do with spectating itself, but with the binary oppositions (reality versus appearance, activity versus passivity, knowledge versus sensation) underlying our understanding of spectatorship. “These [binary] oppositions,” he explains,

[…] are quite different from logical oppositions between clearly define terms. They specifically define a distribution of the sensible, an a priori distribution of the positions and capacities and incapacities attached to these positions. They are embodied allegories of inequality. That is why we can change the value of the terms, transform a ‘good’ term into a ‘bad’ one and vice versa, without altering the functioning of the opposition itself. Thus, the spectator is discredited because she does nothing, whereas actors on the stage or workers outside put their bodies in action. But the opposition of seeing and doing returns as soon as we oppose to the blindness of manual workers and empirical practitioners, mired in immediacy and routine, the broad the perspective of those who contemplate ideas, predict the future or
take a comprehensive view of our world. In the past, property owners who lived off their private income were referred to as *active* citizens, capable of electing and being elected, while those who worked for a living were *passive* citizens, unworthy of these duties. The terms can change their meaning, and the positions can be reversed, but the main thing is that the structure of counter-posing two categories—those who possess a capacity and those who do not—persists. (12)

The point that Rancière tries to make here is important and can be restated roughly as follows: what counts as “activity” and “passivity” frequently changes depending on historical contexts, but what stays the same is the value judgment that one of side of the binary is superior to the other. The word “passive,” in other words, is not used to describe the fixed property of a thing, but to condemn it as inferior to something else. “Passive” here expresses a value judgment, not facts. That Plato, Brecht, and Artaud regard spectating as passive tells us more about their value systems than about the act of spectating itself. Nothing about the act of spectating requires us to regard it as passive. Kant, for example, characterizes perception as involving both activity and passivity. Why should that not also apply in the context of an art gallery or the theater?

Spectating, then, is not the problem. The problem is hierarchy. Spectating is categorized by Plato as passive because, unlike knowledge and action, it does not admit of hierarchy. Whereas one could succeed or fail in the pursuit of knowledge or in executing an action, spectating has no criterion of failure. It does not make sense to say “I spectate better than you,” though it makes perfect sense to say “I know more than you” or “I can
execute this act better than you.” What is at stake in the valuation of spectating is the desire to construct a hierarchical distinction between the competent and the incompetent. From Plato’s point of view, spectating is dangerous because it destabilizes the social order. The problem has its analogy in education, and it is there that Rancière shows us how hierarchies could be overturned.

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1988), Rancière outlines two approaches to pedagogy. According to one model, the teacher is the one with the knowledge, while the pupil is ignorant. In this model, learning is an ordered process with clear asymmetric power relations: the teacher is the master who explicates knowledge while the pupil is a novice who receives instruction. Knowledge, according to this model, is transmitted from a superior intelligence to an inferior one. It is a pedagogical model based on inequality. The other pedagogical model that Rancière outlines is the opposite. Here, both the teacher and the pupil are regarded as equally ignorant. Instead of transmitting knowledge, the teacher’s role – since he is ignorant and does not know – is to activate and reaffirm the intelligence that the pupil already has, an intelligence that is in no way inferior to the teacher’s. As an example of this model, Rancière cites the story of Joseph Jacotot, an exiled French schoolteacher who “taught” his Flemish-speaking students all sorts of subjects without ever learning to speak Flemish. He did this mainly by *avoiding* instruction. His method of teaching (if “method” is indeed the right word) was to encourage his students to engage with learning materials (such as books) on their own, and to pay special attention to the way they exercise their intelligence. As an ignorant teacher, Rancière says, “[he] will not verify what the student has found; he will verify that the student has searched”; his task is
to do nothing except to “judge whether or not [the student] has paid attention” (IS 31). In effect, this liberates the students from the need for master-explicators. The hierarchy between knowers and non-knowers here is abolished: teacher and pupil are now regarded as intelligences of equal status. The term that Rancière uses to describe this overturning of hierarchies is *emancipation*. “Intellectual emancipation is the verification of the equality of intelligence,” he writes, “This does not signify the equal value of all manifestations of intelligence, but the self-equality of intelligence in all its manifestations. There are not two sorts intelligence separated by a gulf” (ES 10). Whether or not he intended, Jacotot shows us that teaching need not imply an inequality of intelligence, that teaching could just be a matter of paying attention to others exercising their capacity for attentive thought. It is a method of teaching that requires neither knowledge nor the communication of facts. All it requires is *logos*, i.e. the capacity to use language to make sense of things, and careful attention to the exercise of its potential.

If hierarchy can be abolished in the classroom, it can also be done in the theater, for the assumption that spectators are passive is analogous to the assumption that pupils are ignorant. Just as it is assumed in the non-emancipated classroom that “[what] the pupil must learn is what the schoolmaster must teach her,” it is assumed in the non-emancipated theater that “[what] the spectator must see is what the director makes her see” (ES 14). To emancipate the spectator in the theater, one must abolish the belief that the cause of the spectacle (i.e. what the director wishes to show) and the effect of the spectacle (i.e. what the spectator should perceive) is linked. One must get rid of the idea that the director is *communicating* a set of thought to the spectator (as if she were a master-explicator and the
spectator merely an ignorant pupil). The emancipated spectator is the spectator who regard herself as an intelligence that is in no way inferior to the director and therefore does not need to figure out what the latter wishes to say. Equality of intelligence is achieved when two perceiving subjects recognize themselves as equally ignorant and therefore equidistant to a third thing. As Rancière puts it:

> In the logic of emancipation, between the ignorant schoolmaster and the emancipated novice there is always a third thing – a book or some other piece of writing – alien to both and to which they can refer to verify in common what the pupil has seen, what she says about it and what she thinks of it. The same applies to performance. It is not the transmission of the artist’s knowledge or inspiration to the spectator. It is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect. (ES 14-15)

In the emancipated theater, then, neither the director nor the spectator has a privileged relation to the intermediary material. The stage here is a space for the meeting of equal intelligences, a common ground owned by no one and equidistant to anyone capable of attentive thought.

For that is what it boils down to: attention thought, i.e. the power that humans have “to translate what she perceives in her own way, to link it to the unique intellectual adventure that makes her similar to all the rest in as much as this adventure is not like any other” (ES 16-17). The emancipated spectator is not a passive receiver of information, but
an attentive thinker who perceives, rearranges, and creates meaning out of the things she sees. She is the poet of the visible, the improvisational producer and director of what she sees. And she comes into being whenever the binary between activity and passivity is abolished, whenever the act of spectating is no longer regarded as the opposite of knowing and doing. “Emancipation,” Rancière says,

begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way – by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented. (ES 13)

A mode of perception that is both active and passive, that simultaneously observes and selects what is visible, that creates multiple meanings out of the pure image – we have seen this before and it should be obvious by now: “attentive thinking” and “emancipated spectating” are both alternative names for “the aesthetic condition.” They all refer to the
same event, namely, the liberation of the image from intentional content. When Schiller writes in Letter XXII of the Ästhetische Briefe that “in einem wahrhaft schönen Kunstwerk soll der Inhalts nichts, die Form aber alles thun” (TS 641), he is already expressing the logic of the emancipated spectator, for if the content does nothing and the form everything, then nothing is communicated by the artist, and the spectator need not figure out a hidden message. When form is everything, the artist and the spectator are equidistant to the aesthetic sensorium: neither has a privileged access to its meaning. Free appearance has no experts, only viewers with the same capacity for attentive thought. It is a mode of perception that suspends all hierarchies, including that between activity and passivity. Since it provides us with no pre-determined meaning, it forces us to go on “an intellectual adventure,” i.e. to create our own meaning. Art as it is experienced in the aesthetic condition is a continual demonstration that thought can re-determine what presents itself as a given in the lifeworld.

The process of dis-identifying oneself with the regime of the given, however, is called politics. As such, the aesthetic condition has an unavoidable political dimension. “The aesthetic community is a community of dis-identified persons,” Rancière writes. “As such, it is political because political subjectivation proceeds via a process of dis-identification” (ES 73). This process of dis-identification never ends because it is

37 Todd May (2008) emphasizes this performative aspect of equality in his reading of Rancière’s political thought. His characterization of Rancièrian equality as “active,” however, though not entirely false, is somewhat at odds with Rancière’s desire to overcome the hierarchical value judgment implicit in the passive versus active binary. Rancière does not view equality as a value that one strives after, and with good reason: the moment equality is treated as an end, it becomes a political interest rather than politics proper. May’s appropriation of Rancière comes too close, I think, to treating equality as an end. See The Political Thought of Jacques Ranciere: Creating Equality, Chapter 2, pp. 38-77.
precarious: the act of dis-identification must be continually re-performed, for the moment sense has been redistributed, there is a new distribution of sense and a new regime of the police. If aesthetic education is a never-ending process, it is not because there is some regulative ideal that we approach asymptotically, but because the act of dis-identification that the aesthetic condition teaches us is something that must be re-performed ad infinitum. There is no progress here, only the repeated re-staging of sense redistribution. The politics of aesthetic experience is a politics of repetition: the aesthetic does not progress, it merely repeats itself in different contexts.

Aesthetic experience, however, is just one way of redistributing the sensible, for the spectator is not the only person capable of renegotiating the given. Authors, composers, and artists, too, are able to do this. In their case, what brings about the redistribution of sense is not the experience of observing an aesthetic sensorium, but the form of the presentation. Authors, composers, and artists must select not only what they are presenting, but how they present them, and they must do this against the backdrop of history and audience expectation. Their choice matters because they have the ability to bring new things into the sphere of visibility in and through the practice of art. They have the power to reconfigure what art is, what it depicts, what it performs. The easiest way to think about this is through writing. Writing has meant a lot of different things throughout history. What it came to mean, however, by the middle of the nineteenth century tells us much about what Rancière calls the politics of literature.
According to Letter IX of the Ästhetische Briefe, the artist, though a child of his time, must not be a mere “Zögling” or “Günstling” of his epoch (TS 583). The artist, Schiller argues, must appear as “eine fremde Gestalt” to his contemporaries: though he may use his time as the material for his work, the form of the work must come from outside time, from the pure ether of his “dämonischen Natur” (TS 584). The passage where Schiller says this is one of the more fervent passages of the Ästhetische Briefe. It is worth quoting in full:

Eine wohltätige Gottheit reiße den Säugling bei Zeiten von seiner Mutter Brust, nähe ihn mit der Milch eines bessern Alters und lasse ihn unter fernem griechischen Himmel zur Mündigkeit reifen. Wenn er dann Mann geworden ist, so kehre er, eine fremde Gestalt, in sein Jahrhundert zurück, aber nicht, um es mit seiner Erscheinung zu erfreuen, sondern furchtbar wie Agamemnons Sohn, um es zu reinigen. Den Stoff zwar wird er von der Gegenwart nehmen, aber die Form von einer edleren Zeit, ja, jenseits aller Zeit, von der absoluten, unwandelbaren Einheit seines Wesens entlehnen. Hier aus dem reinen Äther seiner dämonischen Natur rinnt die Quelle der Schönheit herab, unangesteckt von der Verderbnis der Geschlechter und Zeiten, welche tief unter ihr in trüben Strudeln sich wälzen. (TS 583-4)

What is particularly striking about this passage is the comparison of the artist to the ominous figure of Orestes, which suggest that the creation of a work of art is governed by a violent matricidal-regicidal impulse. The “Form” that Schiller describes here is not an ideal of beauty that the artist transforms to matter to delight the audience. It is an instrument
of murder, a weapon used to purify ("reinigen") the corruption of the present, i.e. the very mother that gave birth to the artist. Moreover, it is to be taken from "jenseits aller Zeit," which suggests that it is not so much eternally persistent as it is outside of historical time, as if it were actively resisting temporality. That this "Form" should also be a weapon of violence, however, requires explanation. What exactly does "Form" purify? What sort of violence does it bring about? And is Schiller here describing the general condition of art, whether naïve or sentimental, ancient or modern, visual or musical, tragic or comic? Or is he describing a specific type of artist?

We can demystify a large portion of the above passage by comparing it once again to "Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais." The act of purification through art, for example, might be compared to the lifting of the veil, an event that has the potential to undo the organization of a whole society. "Form" here would correspond to the image that is unveiled, the pure image that delegitimizes the instituted form of life built around the mystery of hidden truths. The matricidal impulse, meanwhile, would stand in for the desire to destroy the regime of the self-evidential that nurtured the youth’s curiosity. That Schiller conceives of "Form" as a violent negation is evident enough when he writes that artists should use "Form" to destroy content ("den Stoff durch die Form vertilgt") (TS 641). The violence that the artist instigates, however, is used to counter the violence that is already present as corruption ("Verderbnis"). As such, artistic form is best characterized as an act of counter-violence. Just as there is an unavoidable "violent encounter between [political] philosophy and the exception of the law of arkhê proper to politics" (DIS 48), there is an unavoidable
violent encounter between the form of an artwork and the regime of the given that normally organizes perceptual experience.

But what exactly is form? Schiller contrasts it to the material (Stoff) and the intentional content (Inhalt) of the artwork, but it is not clear what that means in the context of a literary text. Is form to be identified with the plot structure or the developmental arcs of characters in a novel? Or is it to be identified with the mood, tone, and voice of the narrative? Or perhaps the manner in which syntax, sentences, and paragraphs are constructed? Or perhaps all of the above? There are many candidates here for form and it is not clear what Schiller has in mind. Fortunately, other writers have written about form in a way that might help us come to a better understanding of the implications of Schiller’s thought. Gustave Flaubert’s letter to Louise Colet on January 16, 1852, for example, describes form in a way that fits surprisingly well with Schiller’s definition. “The finest works,” he writes,

are those that contain the least matter; the closer expression comes to thought, the closer language comes to coinciding and merging with it, the finer the result. I believe the future of Art lies in this direction. I see it, as it has developed from its beginnings, growing progressively more ethereal, from Egyptian pylons to Gothic lancets, from the 20,000-line Hindu poems to the effusions of Byron. Form, in becoming more skillful, becomes attenuated; it leaves behind all liturgy, rule, measure; the epic is discarded in favor of the novel, verse in favor of prose; there is no longer any orthodoxy, and form is as free as the will of its creator. […] It is for this
reason that there are no noble subjects or ignoble subjects; from the standpoint of pure Art one might almost establish the axiom that there is no such thing as subject – style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things. (MS 115)

Now, there many ways to misread this passage from Flaubert’s letter, one of which is to reduce it to a generic statement of *l’art pour l’art*. But Flaubert here is talking about form in a very specific way: he says the more it disregards the subject matter, the more rarified or attenuated it becomes, the closer it gets to becoming what he calls “an absolute manner of seeing things.” In *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, Rancière interprets this ambiguous last phrase of Flaubert to mean that form is neither a matter of elegant constructions nor the expression of artistic subjectivity. “For form as well as matter is at stake,” Rancière says,

> The endpoint of ‘liberation’ [for form] is its suppression. Byron’s ‘effusions’ are by no means the final realization of poetry. ‘Pure’ form is not the free expression of a subjectivity deciding arbitrarily upon its subjects and its means of creation. Style is not the free fantasy of a caster (or breaker) of spells in the style of Novalis or Jean-Paul who immerses prosaic reality in the ether of poetry. It is ‘an absolute manner of seeing things.’ […] To write is to see, to become an eye, to put things into the pure medium of their vision, *that is*, in the pure medium of their idea. […] An ‘absolute manner of seeing things’ is in the first place a manner of seeing whose only relation to things is that of *seeing*, whose ‘idea’ about them cannot be separated from
‘their’ idea, that is, from the manifestation of the medium of their visibility. 

[...] An ‘absolute manner of seeing things’ is not the possibility of selecting angles and lenses to magnify, decrease, deform or color things at will. On the contrary, it is a manner of seeing things as they are, in their ‘absoluteness.’ (MS 116)

Pure form, in other words, is absolute style, which is neither the expression of a subjectivity nor art for art’s sake. In fact, it is the opposite of these things, for it is the negation of the artist and the work of art. Pure form shows itself as the disappearance of form, as the dissolution of ordered representation, an event that makes vision itself become visible. “The artist’s presence within his work, just like that of ‘God of nature,’ consists in his dissemination,” Rancière says. “It consists in making himself the medium of this dissolution. Style is not a matter of sentences because it is primarily a matter of ‘conception.’ There is no language proper to literature, only a syntax that is above all an order of vision, that is, a disorder of representation” (MS 117).

To bring about an absolute style in his writing, Flaubert has to write in a very particular manner. First, he has to make his sentences impassive, so as to dissolve the authorial voice. He does this, Rancière says, through an “anti-syntactical” use of syntax, a use of syntax that undoes “the distinction between objective and subjective, the establishment of a causal order among actions and emotions, the subordination of the accessory to the principal” (MS 123). On the level of syntax, in other words, Flaubert’s writing flattens everything onto the plane of pure phenomena, so that opinions are no longer distinguishable from facts, and contingency is no longer distinguishable from necessity.
Second, Flaubert has to do the same thing on a macro level: he has to construct a narrative that is neither organized around the binary of foregrounds and backgrounds of dramatic actions (a technique of the representational regime) nor around a plot and its occasional interruptions (a technique common amongst Romantic era writers). His solution, according to Rancière, is to construct a narrative where the digressions are central to the plot, while the plot is nothing more than an extended digression. In *Madame Bovary*, for instance, long descriptive passages about inanimate objects is built into the structure of the story, not as an accessory, but as part of the narrative’s unfolding, as another event in the great chain of happenings. In Flaubert’s narrative, writes Rancière, there is “no disjunction between the straight line of the story and the ‘literary’ silences said to interrupt it. There is only one line, but it is within that line that the contradiction is played out. At every moment the line risks going astray and turning into authorial self-display or the platitude of the prose of the world” (MS 123). Flaubert, in short, fuses “narrative syntax” and “contemplative antisyntax” into an ambiguous composite where “the straight line of the narrative is not cut by contemplative moments but rather composed of these moments; the representative narrative is constituted of atoms of antirepresentation” (MS 123). These “atoms of antirepresentation,” Rancière says, can be compared to *music*. Schopenhauer conceives of music as the expression of the *will*, the mindless, aimless metaphysical absolute that cannot be represented yet enables representation. Absolute style is like music because it, too, is an expression of the will: the dance of anti-representative atoms makes manifest the blind force of representation, the unseen power that frames visibility. But it does this, Rancière says, “on the condition of becoming invisible, or becoming music” (MS 124).
absolute manner of seeing, style not only erases the logic of representation, but also the disappearance of this logic. It erases itself into pure music: “the art that speaks without speaking” (MS 124). Absolute style displays no artistic form, for it is the erasure of form’s visibility. Thus, the limit of absolute style is equated with the destruction of ‘fine’ writing, to the point where the text is “identified with the platitude of ordinary speech” (MS 124). Style is absolute when there are no foregrounds or backgrounds, when there are no distinctions to be made between what is important and what is unimportant. In absolute style, everything is important and unimportant: meaning and meaninglessness enter into a zone of indistinction. What absolute style performs, in other words, is the muteness of senseless chatter, the sound of loquacious silence. “The labor of style,” Rancière writes, is […] to separate the mute-loquacious letter from itself, to silence its chatter so that the music of its muteness may resonate. What does it mean to ‘write mediocrity well’ if not to allow us to hear in chatter the silence that doubles it? To write the scene of the Golden Lion in Madame Bovary well means writing the pointless chatter of customers in its irredeemable stupidity, and simultaneously undoing, line by line, the links that make this nonsense pass as meaningful, transforming its nothingness into another nothingness. It means making the emptiness of the great desert of the Orient shine through its opacity, bringing forth the immense boredom that is at heart of everything and that redeems everything. The book about nothing converts the stupidity of the world into the stupidity of art. It imperceptibly lifts the great slack covering language that speaks itself – the stupidity of the world
– in order to bring into existence, like a single snag in its surface, the sentences of the book and the mute lives of its characters, those ‘obscure souls, damp with melancholy’ that another letter [from Flaubert] says are like provincial rear courtyards eaten away by moss. (MS 125)

Flaubert’s absolute style is a great example of what Schiller means by form because it pushes the logic of purification to its extreme. For Form to destroy Stoff, Flaubert shows us, sense must become nonsense, and writing must become mute. Form here is nothing less than the erasure of art, the negation of the artwork qua work. And just as Orestes has to rebel against the entire social order in order to purify his age of its corruption, Flaubert has to wage a never-ending war against the logic of expression in order to turn writing into “an absolute manner of seeing.” All works of art regarded as aesthetic must replicate this purification logic. It need not be done in the same fashion, but on some level, whether it is through the spectator of the work or through the organization of the work itself, Stoff must be effaced through Form.

Flaubert’s absolutization of style shows us how art is political even when it relentlessly denies all gestures of significance. Though Flaubert today is often associated with reactionary politics, his works were recognized in his lifetime as exemplary of the democratic spirit. “Flaubert’s disregard for any difference between high and low subject matters, for any hierarchy between foreground and background, and ultimately between men and things,” Rancière says, “was the hallmark of democracy” (DIS 162). It does not matter that the author himself was known to have despised democrats and conservatives alike. The fact of the matter is, his style expresses an egalitarian principle: “the ‘democratic’
principle of indifference” (DIS 164). “Flaubert made all words equal just as he suppressed any hierarchy between worthy subjects and unworthy subjects, between narration and description, foreground and background, and ultimately, between men and things” Rancière maintains (PL 8). Moreover, whereas writing in the representational regime was conceived on the model of the speech-act, i.e. as an equivalent to “the act of the orator who is persuading the popular assembly” to think in a certain direction, Flaubert’s absolutization of style turns his text into a “mute speech,” i.e. a mode of speech incapable of responding to the audience and therefore indifferent to its interpretation (DIS 165). Mute speech could be taken to mean anything, for it is a letter sent without destination. Unlike living speech, mute speech has no master to control its effect, no author to arbitrate its reception. The idea goes as far back as Phaedrus. “They are mute,” Rancière says,

in the sense that they had been uttered long ago by Plato when he contrasted the wandering of the orphan letter to the living logos, planted by a master as a seed in the soul of a disciple, where it could grow and live. The ‘mute letter’ was the letter that went its way, without a father to guide it. It was the letter that spoke to anybody, without knowing to whom it had to speak, and to whom it had not. The ‘mute’ letter was a letter that spoke too much and endowed anyone at all with the power of speaking. […] The Flaubertian aristocracy of style was originally tied to the democracy of the mute letter, meaning the letter that anybody can retrieve and use in his or her way. [DIS 165-6]
Flaubert’s style, then, is both political and democratic. He may not have intended it, but the pointless chatter in Madame Bovary is the perfect expression of the anarchic demos that politics perform whenever there is a redistribution of the sensible.

Flaubert, of course, is just one example amongst many. But he is illustrative. He shows us how writing can at once be mute and loquacious, at once oversaturated with words and yet completely empty of meaning. And writing here, of course, stands for any work of art in any aesthetic sensorium. Absolute style has its analogy in the pure image as well as in pure music, pure poetry, pure dance. There are many ways of staging the aesthetic condition: it can be as simple as 4’33” or as complex as Finnegans Wake. For a work of art to be regarded as aesthetic, the only requirement that needs to be fulfilled is that it redistributes the sensible, and this is achieved whenever the work is viewed as an autonomous surface that can always be inscribed or effaced of meaning, whenever appearance stages a revolt against the authority of discursive representation. And just as in politics, the power of the people must be “re-enacted ceaselessly by political subjects that challenge the police distribution of parts” (DIS 62), in the aesthetic experience of art, the power of attentive thought must be continually staged through dissensus.

That, in a nutshell, is the politics of aesthetics as conceived by Rancière. Its origin can be traced back to the concept of the aesthetic condition, which dares to unify the active and the passive in the act of perception, thus liberating form from content and equalizing all spectators. Schiller the theorist is one thing, however. Schiller the artist is another. Is the poet and dramatist aware of the implications of his theory? The theorist maintains that form must destroy content in art, but what has the artist produced that demonstrates this
principle? Compared to the works of contemporaries such as Goethe and Hölderlin, Schiller’s poems strike us as rather dated and conventional. They do not seem to be great examples of the aesthetic regime: they appear too abstract and didactic, too much of a *Gedankenlyrik*, where ideas rather than the experience of language are communicated through the verse. If we want to read one of Schiller’s poems as an aesthetic work of art, we will need to find a way to read it as non-communicative, as the suspension of expression rather than its vessel. The key here will be for us to pay attention to the performative dimension of Schiller’s text. If we are attentive to this, and if remind ourselves that all works of art, even the most old-fashioned ones, can always be re-framed as a sensorium for the aesthetic gaze, we will see that Schiller’s poems, too, stages sense redistribution. I will try to show this in my reading of one of his more well-known poems: *Der Spaziergang*.

**Chapter 2.4 – The Sun of Homer**

Schiller’s *Der Spaziergang* was first published in *Die Horen* in November 1795 as a 216-line poem under the nondescript title of *Elegie*. It was the author’s first major work to be composed in elegiac couplets, and Schiller thought highly enough of it to report to Wilhelm von Humboldt that his talents “[hat] sich […] in diesem Gedichte erweitert: noch in keinem ist der Gedanke selbst so poetisch gewesen und geblieben, in keinem hat das Gemüth so sehr als eine Kraft gewirkt” (NA XXVIII, 115). The second version of the poem, which was shortened to 200 lines and edited for improved metrical flow, was published in 1800 under the now more familiar name of *Der Spaziergang*. Since then, the poem has been subject to much commentary and analysis. Guided perhaps by Schiller’s emphasis that “der
“Gedanke selbst” has been made “poetisch” in this work, the overwhelming majority of the interpretations agree that the text is an expression of Schiller’s philosophical ideas.

Now, what these ideas are is the subject of some debate in recent studies. Jürgen Stenzel (1984) argues that the poem is essentially about “die Idee des Erhabenen” that Schiller took and developed from Kant (69). Wolfgang Riedel (1989), on the other hand, thinks the poem has more to do with “die Versöhnung von Vernunft und Sinnlichkeit durch das Schöne” (18). Peter André-Alt (2000) partially agrees with Riedel’s reading, but he emphasizes the poem as essentially elegiac in character: what is won in the end, he writes, is not genuine reconciliation, but “ein sentimentalisches Wunschbild” which is “[ein] Zeichen modernen Verlusts” (293). Jürgen Brokoff (2011), more recently, argues that the poem evinces a teleologically linear schema of human development (from nature to culture to reconciliation): “Die lineare und teleologische Struktur der vom Gedicht dargestellten Entwicklung,” he says, “manifestiert sich […] in der Stufenfolge ‘Kind’ – ‘Jüngling’ – ‘Mann’” (271). Despite these differences in the interpretation of the poem’s philosophical ideas, all these commentators agree that the poem does indeed express ideas. The communicative function of Schiller’s poetry is not questioned. Although Brokoff points out that the work displays both “die enge Verbindung” and “die unaufhebbare Differenz”

38 According to Riedel, *Der Spaziergang* is in many ways a perfect example of Schillerian poetics: “Wie in kaum einem anderen sah Schiller in der Elegie die Intention seiner philosophischen Lyrik verwirklicht: der Reflexion eine Sprache zu geben, die Vernunft durch Schönheit erweist und, indem sie sowohl die Idee unmittelbar dem Empfinden offenbart wie umgekehrt die ästhetische Anschauung im theoretischen Begriff ‘aufhebt,’ die Trennung von Intellekt und Sinnlichkeit überwindet und die menschlichen Gemütskräfte als Totalität anspricht und bewegt” (18). Like many other commentators, Riedel understands aesthetic experience here to be a harmonious coming together of sense and sense, not *dissensus*. It is precisely this mode of thinking that I wish to overcome in my reading of Schiller’s aesthetics.
between Schiller’s theoretical and fictional writings (269), this “Differenz” in the end turns out to be a mere difference in the modes of communication (poetic versus philosophical) – that communication is the goal is not disputed. Ultimately, then, all these commentators interpret the poem through the lens of the representational regime: in their views, the poem displays a harmonious union of sense and thought rather than their coming apart. It is as if Schiller had failed to heed the advice of his own theory, as if he had forgotten that in a true work of art, form alone should do all the work. And perhaps these commentators are right to read Der Spaziergang this way. After all, it was the author himself who said: “noch in keinem [meiner Gedichte] ist der Gedanke selbst so poetisch gewesen und geblieben” (NA XXVIII, 115).

Or perhaps these readings are misguided. When Schiller says that “der Gedanke selbst” is made “poetisch” in Der Spaziergang, the word “Gedanke” is ambiguous: it could signify a determinate body of thought, or it could refer to thought in its reflective capacity, i.e. thought as an indeterminate procedure of apperception. In the latter case, making “Gedanke” become “poetisch” would just mean giving thought a surface on which to liberate itself from fixed determinations. Likewise, when Schiller says that “in keinem [seiner Gedichte] hat das Gemüth so sehr als eine Kraft gewirkt” (NA XXVIII, 115), the emphasis on “eine” need not signify a unified totality where sense is subsumed under thought. A mind that is one is a mind that thinks without dividing experience into appearance and reality, a mind that draws no sharp distinction between subject and object. Nothing here implies the expression of a worldview; nothing here precludes Form from destroying Stoff. That the work communicates ideas is not a given.
Let us try, then, to read Der Spaziergang aesthetically. The first step requires us to be more attentive towards the rhetorical dimension of Schiller’s verse. Past readings of this poem have a tendency to ascribe symbolic functions to all its key moments so that every imagery and figure ends up being subsumed under a conceptual schema. In the last line of the poem, for example, Stenzel reads “die Sonne Homers” as a “Symbol der Unabhängigkeit von der Zeit” (76), Brokoff reads it as an image “der unveränderlichen Natur” (271), and Alt reads it as an emblem of mourning (“Die Sonne Homers ist – darin liegt die elegische Botschaft des Spaziergang – gerade nicht jene Sonne, die Homer beschien”) (293). Gerhard Storz (1959) expresses the opinion of many when he writes: “Wie in allen Gedichten Schillers aus jener Zeit stehen sich entgegen: Naturgebundenheit – Freiheit; Glück – Zwiespalt; Frühe, Zeitlosigkeit – Geschichte” (221). What Storz and other commentators ignore is the imperative that follows the reference to the sun of Homer: “siehe!” To see the sun of Homer as a symbol is not to see it at all, for it is an act of interpretation, a subsumption of sense under the dominion of thought. What is lost when the sun is ascribed a symbolic function is the sensorium that makes seeing as such possible. Yet that is exactly what Schiller tells us to do: “siehe!” The sun is smiling: “sie lächelt auch uns.” How can we see the sun smile if we do not look at its external face? Besides, Homer would not have regarded the sun as a symbol: as a writer of ancient epics, he is associated with descriptive, non-symbolic narratives (what Schiller calls “naïve” poetry). To see the sun of Homer as a symbol, then, is to not see it as Homer’s sun. If we want to avoid the paradox of symbolizing a figure of the non-symbolic, we will need to rethink what is at stake in this poem.
Let us start again, then, from the very beginning. The poem’s title is *Der Spaziergang*. To go for a walk (*spazieren gehen*) is to travel without any destination in mind. It is to wander about, to roam, to move without following a fixed path. While going for a walk, one can move back and forth, in circles, or in a straight line. Unlike goal-oriented walking (*gehen*), going for a walk (*spazieren gehen*) does not have an endpoint and does not have a criterion of success. There is no such thing as being good or bad at going for a walk, one simply goes for a walk. Schiller’s poem, of course, describes a walk, but the walk that the narration describes is not the only thing the title might be referring to. Perhaps the text here also goes for a walk, not just rhythmically through the constant alternation of meters in the elegiac couplets, but by liberating itself of *telos*. Perhaps language here goes for a walk because it rejects narrative plot.

Indeed, the poem begins that way. The first six lines of the poem is a series of greetings to scenes of nature: “Sei mir gegrüßt, mein Berg mit dem rötlich strahlenden Gipfel! / Sei mir, Sonne, gegrüßt, die ihn so lieblich bescheint! / Dich auch grüß’ ich, belebte Flur, euch, säuselnde Linden, / Und den fröhlichen Chor, der auf den Ästen wiegt, / Ruhige Bläue, dich auch, die unermeßlich sich ausgießt / um das braune Gebirg, über den grünenden Wald […]”. Each line here evokes an image that is singular, non-symbolic, self-contained. None of the lines are connected by the logic of causal or spatiotemporal relations: the images are simply placed paratactically next to one another, like a list of random objects that happens to come into view. There are neither foregrounds nor backgrounds here, no distinction between what is essential or non-essential. Personification is used to describe some objects (e.g. “den fröhlichen Chor”), but nothing suggests
symbolic significance. The *ich-du* relation suggests a mood of informal familiarity, preventing any sense of mystery from entering the picture, and the vocative case undoes any hierarchy between the perceived object and the perceiving subject: to greet *x* is not to act upon an object, but to acknowledge its presence, to welcome its being. Nothing so far is indicative of plot. The poem presents us with a montage of sense images, but it does not yet establish any logical relations between them.

That changes slightly in lines 7-8, with the introduction of the past tense: “Auch um mich, der, endlich entflohn des zimmer Gefängnis // Und dem engen Gespräch [...]” All of a sudden, a sense of spatiality and temporality is established: we learn that that speaker was in a room *before* the greetings of nature, and that this room, in contrast to open nature, was a place of physical and intellectual confinement. And yet, this is not quite the beginning of the narrative proper, for space and time remain indeterminate. Lines 9-18 present us with a series of vivid sense-images without any explicit logical connection, so that the experience of colors and light (“Kräftig auf blühender Au erglänzen die wechselnden Farben [...] Glühend trifft mich der Sonne Pfeil”), movement and sound (“Um mich summt die geschäftige Bien’ [...] Nur der Lerche Gesang wirbelt in heiterer Luft”), the freshness of the wind (“Deiner Lüfte balsamischer Strom durchrinnt mich erquickend”), etc. are placed next to one another like atoms of singular sense impression. Nevertheless, there is a tension: the persistence of the first-person singular pronoun threatens to merge these atoms of singular sense impression into a unified experience (with the establishment of a temporal “before,” the “I” now appears as a persisting subject). The tension soon resolves in favor of experiential unity: with the introduction of a temporal
adverb in line 19 (“Doch jezt”), a sense of temporal progression becomes palpable. Line 23, meanwhile, signals a change in the mood and scenery (“In des Waldes Geheimniß entfleht mir auf einmal die Landschaft”). Suddenly, we find ourselves in a more confined space. A sense of the unknown becomes palpable: the “Geheimniß” of the forest suggests that there is something beyond that which is perceived. Line 24 describes a path that leads the speaker upwards (“Und ein schlängender Pfad leitet mich steigend empor”), indicating a direction of spatial movement. The narrative here is gradually constraining our vision, slowly leading us towards a certain destination. We are no longer in the open: the poetics of free montage has been replaced with the logic of narrative progress.

Lines 25-35 further solidify the spatiotemporal narrowing of the narrative. The speaker looks up through the canopy of the forest and looks down towards the foot of the mountain. They describe themself as walking on a path “zwischen der ewigen Höh’ und der ewigen Tiefe” (l. 35), which is not so much a description of what they see as of what they cannot see. Stenzel reads this as a scene of the sublime (“Erhaben ist dieser Anblick, weil das ‘Unendliche’ die Fassungskraft des menschlichen Verstandes überfordert,” he writes) (71). There is no evidence, however, that the speaker is emotionally affected by the landscape: what is evident is that their consciousness is now extending beyond the realm of the immediately visible, so that the idea of the infinite, which is invisible, is projected onto the realm of the finite and the visible. The narrative now progresses not only horizontally through narrative time, but also vertically through ideational abstraction. By

39 Although it is a cliché of the Romantic era to envision lone wanderers as a male figure, nothing in Schiller’s text forces us to regard the speaker as a man. Here, I have chosen to use the gender-neutral pronoun “they” when referring to the speaker, partially to free the text of false associations and unhelpful cliches, and partially to remind us that gender neutrality is an important feature of the speaker’s identity.
the time we reach line 39, we are hardly surprised to encounter the first explicit symbolic figure of the poem, namely, the line of demarcation (perhaps a hedge or fence) signifying human culture (“Jene Linien, sieh! die des Landmanns Eigenthum scheiden”). In the lines that follow, the visual gradually becomes subordinated to the discursive. Rather than describing sense impressions, the poem now actively bombards us with symbolic significance. Besides the physical line signifying “des Landmanns Eigenthum” (which tells us that we are in a rural area and that property here is protected by the law), sounds such as “der Herden Geläut’” and the “des Hirten Gesang” (l. 47-8) are signs of a certain way of life. At this point, perception has become an interpretation of signs. It is now colonized not only by the logic of narrative, but also the symbolic function of language.

Lines 39-172 is a long, well-organized narrative unit describing the development of human society from its ancient, agriculture-based origins to its modern self-alienated state. Traditional readings interpret it as an expression of Schiller’s philosophy of history: although commentators disagree on the exact details, there is a general consensus that antiquity is staged in lines 39-58 as a “lost paradise,” while the development of modern civilization is criticized in lines 59-172 as the destruction of nature through technology (“Zischend fliegt in den Baum die Axt, es erseufzt die Dryade,” says line 104) and the destruction of ethics through freedom (“Freiheit ruft die Vernunft, Freiheit die wilde Begierde, / Von der heil’gen Natur ringen sie lüstern sich lost [...] Aus dem Gespräche verschwindet die Wahrheit, Glauben und Treue / Aus dem Leben, es lügt selbst auf der Lippe der Schwur”) (l. 141-150). Riedel, for example, reads lines 55-58 as an expression of a sentimental view of rural society (“Die vom Wanderer im Anblick des rurales Daseins
imaginierte Idee einer Einheit von Mensch und Natur, die keine ‘Entzweiung’ kennt, jener seligen Identität, in der Unmündigkeit und Glück noch nicht geschieden sind, verkörpert das verlorene Paradies des sentimentalischen Geistes schlechthin […]” (60) and lines 141-150 as a critique of modern civilization (“Die Verwirklichung der ‘Freiheit’ von Naturschranken, von ‘Vernunft’ und ‘wilde[r] Begierde’ [l. 141] zugleich betrieben, setzt so eine Dialektik der Aufklärung in Gang, die das Bild der Menschheits-entwicklung ins Negative umschlagen läßt”) (83). Alt, similarly, emphasizes the narrative as critical of modernity (“Die Emanzipation des Individuums, das, wie es heißt, seine ‘Feßeln zerbricht,’ mündet nicht allein in die ‘Freiheit’ (v. 143ff.) der Vernunft, sondern erzeugt auch einen Zustand der moralischen Bindungslosigkeit und Denaturierung”) (288). Stenzel, meanwhile, prefers to interpret the process of history here as “ein Chaos, in dem ein Sinn nicht mehr zu erkennen ist: ‘Bleibends ist nichts mehr, es irrt selbst in dem Busen der Gott’ [l. 148]” (74). Despite this, he still recognizes history as moving in a specific direction, namely, away from nature and towards moral anarchy (73). In the end, all these readings agree that the narrative unit depicts a model of history where human civilization progresses from a state of oneness with nature in antiquity to a state of alienation from nature in modern society. The narrative concludes by comparing humanity’s desire to seek “in der Asche der Stadt […] die verlorene Natur” (l. 170) with the image of a tigress breaking free from her cage and longing to return to her forest (l. 165-168). The plot is thus tripartite: from nature, to culture, to the longing for a return to nature. It is a familiar narrative describing a fall from grace and the hope for future redemption (which is why Brokoff stresses the work as unfolding a linear teleology).
But what about the speaker? In the midst of all this story-telling, the speaker has stopped describing concrete scenes of nature and abstract ideas have replaced perception. What began as a symbolic narrative where sensible objects signify abstract ideas has now become an abstract narrative with no connection whatsoever to the here and now. Just as in the narrated history, humanity gradually forgets nature, so over the course of the narrative, the capacity for language to evoke sense impressions is slowly forgotten. The poem, however, abruptly returns us to nature – or what seems to be left of it – in lines 173-6. “Wo bin ich?” asks the speaker, having apparently just woken up from a dream, “Es birgt sich der Pfad. Abschüssige Gründe / Hemmen mit gähnender Kluft hinter mir, vor mir den Schritt. / Hinter mir blieb der Gärten, der Hecken vertraute Begleitung, / Hinter mir jegliche Spur menschlicher Hände zurück.” All of a sudden, we return from the realm of abstract ideas to the presentation of the here and now. But the speaker is no longer sure where they are. We know that they are no longer in a populated area (gardens, hedges, and other human-made objects are behind them). The fact that “der Pfad” has disappeared suggests that the speaker is now free from the constraints of cultural boundaries, yet the verb “hemmen” contradicts this: the abyss-filled landscape, which is described in line 181 as “wild […] und schauerlich öd’,” prevents the speaker from moving either forward or backward. They are stuck in a limbo: alone and with nowhere to go, all they can do is look around to see what there is to see. There is not much. They see a crude formation of basalt, which in their imagination appears as “die Stoffe […] aus welchen das Leben / Keimet” (l. 177-8). They see an eagle and clouds in the sky (l. 182). They hear an absence of human voices (l. 183-4). Are these symbolic figures? Perhaps. Perhaps the basalt symbolizes the
bare material of life. Perhaps the eagle signifies freedom. But these are just images of ideas. In the narrated reality, the speaker is not free, for they are surrounded by yawning abysses, and nature is not brimming with life, for it shows itself as a mere negative, as the absence of human culture. Although we have returned to some sort of nature, nature here is not pure: it is the product of a history, an outcome of the speaker’s journey. The hedges may have been replaced by abysses, but the constraint of boundaries remain.

What, then, is pure nature? Lines 186-188 give us a hint. The speaker rejects their narration of history as “nur ein Traum” in line 186. What is real, it turns out, is not narrative, but nature, and nature, the speaker says, nourishes the old and young alike (l. 195-6). Every human community near and far walk on the same green and underneath the same blue (l. 198-9). Nature is thus like the earth and the sky: it is the ground and the horizon from which all things grow. History always takes place in nature, for nature is that which gets arranged into history. History, one might say, is the distribution of sense units, directed, like footpaths and hedges, in a determinate direction. Nature, meanwhile, is the unchanging frame or horizon that enables the partitioning of sense units. Although it originates history, it does not precede it in time, for history and nature are in fact two sides of the same coin, the coin being language. History signifies language in its capacity to narrate stories, while nature denotes language in its materiality. In a narrative poem, nature is never pure because it is always already contaminated by the perspectival logic of story-telling and symbolic significance. Nature only becomes pure if history is suspended and sense is disrupted. To evoke pure nature, the text must empty itself of meaning: it must become pure gesture or pure performance. We saw something like this at the beginning of the poem when we
encounter a montage of greetings, but how do we return to this state of indeterminacy after the violence of narrative logic has been established? Since every word now seems to be contaminated with significance, the only way out is to construct a self-effacing allegory.

This is what happens towards the end of the poem. In lines 189-190, the speaker promises to take back their life from nature, not history: “Reiner nehm’ ich mein Leben von deinem reinen Altar [...] zurück” they say, addressing nature once again with the second-personal *du* (l. 189-19). From this point onward, the poem dispenses with plot. All references to spatiotemporal progress are dropped. What remains is a song of praise, a display of acclamations spoken in an impersonal voice. Nature is praised for always being youthful and always changing in beauty (l. 193). It is described as pious and chaste in its reverence for “das alte Gesetz” (l. 194). It is praised for being always the same, for nourishing both the young and the old, for encompassing both races near and far (l. 195-199). These words of praise do not necessarily tell us much *what* nature is. How nature can appear “in immer veränderter Schönheit” while remaining “immer dieselbe,” for example, is left mysterious, and what “das alte Gesetz” is supposed to refer to is not explained. But the point of these lines is not to explain: it is to glorify, to adore. Instead of generating meaning by organizing sense units into a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end (i.e. history), language here gestures towards that which frames all beginnings, middles, and ends (i.e. nature) by means of indeterminate metaphors. Once again, language goes for a walk, but unlike at the beginning of the poem, what we encounter is a montage of adulations where words vibrate like music without referring to a specific object. This means that nature is present *as* an absence: although language in its communicative function cannot present
nature, its failure to refer displays a lacuna that gestures towards nature (qua ground of presentation).

In the final line of the poem, we are invited to look at “die Sonne Homers.” The request is clearly paradoxical, for we cannot travel back in time. If the model of history that the poem narrated is right, then we have already lost our oneness with nature and become modern people. How then could we see the same sun that Homer sees? What we encounter here is a figure that exceeds history. To see the sun as “die Sonne Homers” is to see it as a figure excluded by the narration. The figure forces us to look outside the schema that separates us (the moderns) from them (the ancients). It means suspending the partitioning of the sensible that creates a barrier between two historical epochs, bracketing it out as mere fictional construct. The poem is thus neither expressing an elegiac account of history (where we fail to return to nature) nor a story of redemption (where we do return to nature through the experience of art). On the contrary, it invites us to suspend the authority of the plot that makes us think we have fallen away from nature in the first place. History shows itself here as mere fiction, as “nur ein Traum” (l. 186). What is real is nature, the ground of all fictionalizing. The figure of “die Sonne Homers” points us to this, not by reference, but by aporetically contradicting the established narrative frame.

*Der Spaziergang* is therefore not a poem that expresses philosophical ideas. It is a demonstration of language’s capacity to frame and de-frame narratives and gesture towards itself. The poem gives us a tour of four different linguistic operations: it shows us how language can (1) evoke sense images, (2) organize these images into a narrative, (3) ascribe images and narratives with symbolic functions, and (4) revoke all images, narratives, and
symbolic functions by exposing them as fictional constructions arising from an originary unrepresentable material ground. What the reader ends up spectating in the end is language performing itself. The mistake previous commentators of this poem made was to privilege the symbolic function of language, forcing every image and figure into the narrative of civilization’s fall from nature. That does violence to the poem for it subsumes nature under a narrative, thus contradicting how the poem stages it as that which does not belong in any narrative, as that which grounds and yet is absent from history. What is lost in their reading is the display of the unrepresentable gap between the narrative and its frame, which, in my reading, the sun of Homer attempts (but fails) to figure.

By recognizing Der Spaziergang as a display of language rather than an expression of ideas, the aesthetic dimension of the work makes itself manifest. The aesthetic here is not to be identified with any particular function of language. Neither the performative nor the referential function of language is aesthetic: what is aesthetic is the display of their irreducible gap. “If poetry turns its back on ordinary communication,” Rancière writes, “it is not through an intransitive use of language that cancels out meaning. It is through operating a junction between [these] two regimes of meaning” (PL 6). In my reading of Der Spaziergang, the gap between the regimes of Nature and History is shown to be absolute. If “der Gedanke selbst” is made “poetisch” here, it is because “der Gedanke” stands for logos, for our capacity to use language, and logos here displays itself as an irreducible gap between Nature and History, i.e. language in its transitive and intransitive functions. Poetry means giving form to language, allowing it to exhibit itself as such. The
point is not to decipher a message but to see what is being done. In poetry, as in all aesthetic sensorium, there is no message, only spectacles.

But we, the reader, also have a role to play here, for we are not just passive spectators. By following the text, by seeing all these different functions of language at play in an organized fashion, we, too, are creating a story out of our reading experience. And this story is not a story that appears ex nihilo: it is a story that must compete and struggle against previous stories for recognition. Every act of reading is an attempt to rebuke and replace other readings, an attempt to change how a text is seen. As such, reading itself also has an aesthetic dimension: it performs sense redistribution by reconfiguring how the text displays itself. Seen in this light, the content of our reading, i.e. the way we have charted and analyzed the different functions of language that the poem displays, is not important. What is important is that we have paid attention to the text and staged our disagreement with previous regimes of meaning. In the end, whether we read a text, view an image, or stage a protest against the established regime of visibility, the operation of the aesthetic is always the same. There is only one way of unveiling the image, one way of performing dissensus, and that is through the redistribution of the sensible, that is, the disoperation of thought through a disidentification of the given.

Chapter 2.5 – Coda

Our reading of Rancière demonstrates how Schiller’s concept of the aesthetic condition, which he outlines in Letters XIX-XXV, is, in fact, not the harmonious coming together of sense and thought, but an operation of sense redistribution that necessarily disrupts the
regime of the given governing an existing practice or institution. That this operation has an
unavoidable political dimension is clear if we define “politics,” like Rancière, as a process
of subjectivation that produces “surplus subjects” that “inscribe the count of the uncounted
as a supplement” to the totality of a regime of sense (DIS 70). There is, however, a limit to
what aesthetic experience can or cannot do. The relationship between art and life, as we
have seen, is a complicated one: although aesthetic experience can have a positive impact
on life by destabilizing an instituted frame of the sensible, the aesthetic by itself cannot
produce an ethos to guide our way of life. Schiller dramatizes this very vividly in “Das Bild
zu Sais,” where the lifting of the veiled image, which symbolizes the operation of the
aesthetic, results in the loss of “Heiterkeit” and the ability to continue with one’s way of
life. Rancière evinces a similar line of thought when he argues that political subjects are
“always precarious” (DIS 39) and that “aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment
that it cannot satisfy” (DIS 133). That the operation of the aesthetic cannot provide an ethos
to guide life, however, is not considered a shortcoming of aesthetic experience. As
Rancière points out, the fact that art no longer has a “destiny” and cannot provide its
spectators with one is not a reason for us to mourn or make grandiose proclamations about
its death. Responding to naysayers of art and skeptics of the aesthetic, Rancière writes:

A certain melancholy about art’s destiny and its political commitments is
expressed in many ways today, especially in my country, France. The air is
thick with declarations about the end of art, the end of the image, the reign
of communications and advertisements, the impossibility of art after
Auschwitz, nostalgia for the lost paradise of incarnate presence, indictment
of aesthetic utopias for spawning totalitarianism or commodification. My purpose is not to join this mourning choir. On the contrary, I think we can distance ourselves from this current mood if we understand that the “end of art” is not “modernity’s” mischievous destiny but the reverse side of the life of art. To the extent that the aesthetic formula ties art to non-art from the start, it sets that life up between two vanishing points: art becoming mere life or art becoming mere art. I said above that “pushed to the extreme,” each of these scenarios entails its own entropy, its own end of art. But the life of art in the aesthetic regime of art consists precisely of a shuttling between these scenarios, playing an autonomy against a heteronomy and a heteronomy against an autonomy, playing one linkage between art and non-art against another such linkage. (DIS 132)

Art, in short, is still alive in the aesthetic regime. It maintains itself as a practice of dissensus that has an inherent political, but not ethical, dimension. There are, of course, some who prefer that contemporary art rids itself of the aesthetic in order to become ethical witnesses of the unrepresentable. Yet, as Rancière makes clear, “the ethical turn is not a historical necessity, for the simple reason that there is no such thing” (DIS 201). Ultimately, what grounds our desire to make art ethical is “a certain theology of time, the idea of modernity as a time destined to carry out an internal necessity, once glorious, now disastrous” (DIS 201). But the aesthetic regime of the arts is impervious to such apocalyptic visions. It views every narrative, regardless whether it bases itself on a utopian teleology or a messianic theology, as something that can be de-framed and re-framed, just like every partitioning of
the sensible. From the standpoint of the aesthetic, there is no “should” or “must.” Any attempt to valorize art as a moral good, any attempt to privilege the aesthetic as an ethical virtue, is an inherently anti-aesthetic gesture.

Although Rancière accepts that art is not only art, that art can become life, he does not think that the aesthetic remains aesthetic once it enters the realm of life as an ethical imperative. The moment art leaves the anarchic realm of the political for the lawful realm of the police, it is no longer aesthetic. For this reason, Rancière limits himself to the description of the aesthetic dimension in the arts and in politics. He does not tell us what we are to do with our lives, nor does he provide us with an ontological destiny. Yet it is precisely at this point that we start to see a divergence between Rancière’s and Schiller’s thoughts. As is well known, Schiller says in Letter XV of the Ästhetische Briefe that “der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt” (TS 614). Whereas Rancière equates the essence of humanity with our capacity to use language, Schiller’s idea of humanity is more ambitious. Unlike Rancière, he does not describe the human as a being with a certain type of capacity, but as an idea that reason demands of us:

Nun spricht aber die Vernunft: das Schöne soll nicht bloßes Leben und nicht bloße Gestalt, sondern lebende Gestalt, das ist, Schönheit sein; indem sie ja dem Menschen das doppelte Gesetz der absoluten Formalität und der absoluten Realität diktiert. Mithin tut sie auch den Ausspruch: der Spieltrieb soll nicht bloß Sachtrieb, und soll nicht bloß Formtrieb, sondern beides Zugleich, das ist, Spieltrieb sein. Mit andern Worten: der Mensch soll mit
der Schönheit nur spielen, und er soll nur mit der Schönheit spielen. (TS 613-4)

For Schiller, the human is not something that we already are, but something that we ought to become: the dissolution of the Sachtrieb-Formtrieb binary by means of the Spieltrieb is not a description but a prescription. Schiller’s idea of the human, which we will henceforth call the idea of the “aesthetic human,” tells us that we should only play with the beautiful and play only with the beautiful. But is this not an ethical imperative? Why does Schiller think that reason (of all things) demands that we play? And what exactly is involved in play? It cannot just mean frequently visiting art galleries since the experience of art does not dissolve the dialectic of the Sachtrieb and Formtrieb. Frequent redistributions of the sensible merely oscillates us between temporary states of determinacy and indeterminacy, but to constitute oneself as an aesthetic human requires us to move beyond the binary of life and form to achieve a state of play. The idea of the aesthetic human seems to be equated with the idea of a human life that manifests itself as a “lebende Gestalt.” But what is a “lebende Gestalt”? How does life obtain a shape and how does shape become one with life? To fully understand what Schiller means by the aesthetic human, we need to take a philosophical detour to investigate the human/animal distinction. Hence, we turn now to the writings of Giorgio Agamben, the author who has reflected perhaps most deeply on the idea of the aesthetic human, despite never having used the term.
CHAPTER 3: THE AESTHETIC HUMAN

Chapter 3.1 – The Human

I. The Division of Life

In Letter XV of the Ästhetische Briefe, Schiller writes: “der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt” (TS 614). The statement is usually read as an assertion that humanity is whole if and only if the Sachtrieb and the Formtrieb are reconciled into a harmonious unity. This reading is not entirely accurate, however, for Schiller does not define “play” as a harmonious unification. A few sentences prior to this statement, Schiller says: “der Spieltrieb soll nicht bloß Sachtrieb, und soll nicht bloß Formtrieb, sondern beides Zugleich, das ist, Spieltrieb sein” (TS 614). The crucial phrase here is “beides Zugleich,” which does not entail unity but suggests a state of balance where the two drives are allowed to coexist simultaneously. If the function of the Sachtrieb is to create change, while the function of the Formtrieb is to establish permanence, a state of equilibrium between the two drives would result neither in change nor permanence but in their uneasy juxtaposition. To maintain this state of neither/nor, however, the Sachtrieb and the Formtrieb would have to suspend their respective functions. It follows that the Spieltrieb is not to be understood as a harmonious unification of the drives but as the simultaneous juxtaposition and suspension of their difference. Consequently, the idea of the aesthetic human is the idea of a human who suspends her self-division by articulating herself through a non-binary third term. The idea is more radical than it seems at first glance. It demands nothing less than a re-thinking of
the idea of the human as a rational animal, which is one of the founding articles of Western metaphysics.

To see why this is so, we need to see how the *Sachtrieb* and the *Formtrieb* correspond to what has traditionally been regarded as the animal and the human. In Letter XIV, Schiller describes the *Sachtrieb* as a passive capacity for sense reception (“Der Sachtrieb will bestimmt werden, er will sein Object empfangen”) and the *Formtrieb* as an active capacity for conceptual determination (“der Formtrieb will selbst bestimmen, er will sein Object hervorbringen”) (TS 607). This dualist distinction between the passive sensible and active suprasensible faculties is taken from Kant, who identifies humanity with the latter. In the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, for example, Kant uses the term “Menschheit” to refer to our rational capacity to set ends, which he says must always be regarded as an end-in-itself. In one of his most well-known formulation of the categorical imperative, Kant writes: “der Mensch, und überhaupt jedes vernünftige Wesen, existiert als Zweck an sich selbst, nicht bloß als Mittel zum beliebigen Gebrauche für diesen oder jenen Willen […] Handle so, daß du die Menschheit, sowohl in deiner Person als in der Person eines jeden anderen, jederzeit zugleich als Zweck, niemals bloß als Mittel brauchest” (GMS 53-5, 4:428-9). Kant here takes for granted that “Mensch” implies rationality and “Menschheit” is to be identified with reason. This identification of the human with reason is, of course, nothing new: Kant is merely following a long line of tradition stretching back to antiquity. Aristotle, for example, had already done something similar when he divided life in *De Anima* into the three categories of the nutritive, the sense-perceptive, and the rational. It was Aristotle, in fact, who first defined man as a
rational animal (in *De Anima* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*). Since then, human life in the philosophical tradition of the West has almost always been articulated as divided between that which we share with other animals (the body, sense perception, the instinct, etc.) and that which belongs solely to our humanity (the mind, language, rationality, etc.). It is as if we were essentially animal life plus a special faculty, as if we were nothing but our animality plus the capacity for *logos*. Schiller’s division of the human into the *Sachtrieb* and the *Formtrieb* is but another manifestation of this age-old tradition, for it, too, separates the rational from the irrational, the human from the nonhuman. The idea of the aesthetic human, seen in this light, is an attempt to re-think the human beyond the opposition of the human and the animal. By identifying the essence of humanity with play (which is neither exclusively human nor exclusively animal) rather than reason, Schiller is in effect advancing a notion of humanity that refuses to divide life into separate functions.

But before we are in a position to begin assessing the concept of play, we first need to understand the logic of the “plus” that separates the human and the animal in the metaphysical tradition of the West. That the “plus” is to be understood as an operation of scission rather than unification is Agamben’s starting point in *The Open: Man and Animal*, a work that attempts to delineate a genealogy of the human in European intellectual history so as to elucidate what is at stake in the human/animal distinction. In our culture, Agamben writes, “man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element” (*O* 16). Agamben thinks this way of thinking is something that we have inherited from Aristotle, which means that it carries with it the same prejudices
and biases found in the Aristotelian system, for every attempt to divide life into different functions is always an implicit strategic attempt at establishing a hierarchy of values over life. “It is important to observe,” Agamben writes,

that Aristotle in no way defines what life is: he limits himself to breaking it down, by isolating the nutritive function, in order then to rearticulate it in a series of distinct and correlated faculties or potentialities (nutrition, sensation, thought). Here we see at work that principle of foundation which constitutes the strategic device par excellence of Aristotle’s thought. It consists in reformulating every question concerning ‘what something is’ as a question concerning ‘through what [diā τί] something belongs to another thing.’ To ask why a certain being is called living means to seek out the foundation by which living belongs to this being. That is to say, among the various senses of the term ‘to live,’ one must be separated from the others and settle to the bottom, becoming the principle by which life can be attributed to a certain being. In other words, what has been separated and divided (in this case nutritive life) is precisely what – in a sort of divide et impera – allows the construction of the unity of life as the hierarchical articulation of a series of functional faculties and oppositions. (O 14)

Aristotle’s notion of the human, to put it another way, is not the consequence of a metaphysical positing of a substance but the consequence of an ontological articulation of a division within life. “We must learn to […] investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation,” writes Agamben
What is at stake here is not just a matter of metaphysical speculation: the question of life – how it is to be divided, mastered, and hierarchized – has important repercussions for our political future.

Aristotle’s strategy of dividing life to exclude a certain set of functions from the sphere of the human is not unique in the history of Western thought. Thomas Aquinas had to theorize whether the body resurrected in Paradise is identical with the human body that we experience on earth (O 17). What happens to the intestines, the sperm, the sweat, and urine when we enter the kingdom of heaven? Thomas Aquinas, Agamben says, “proclaims unreservedly that animal life is excluded from Paradise, that blessed life is in no case an animal life” (O 19). He repeats Aristotle’s operation of excluding by way of inclusion (for the animal is a part of us, yet not us) in the domain of Christian theology. But he is just one amongst countless many. According to Agamben, the Aristotelian division and exclusion of life functions has come to dominate, proliferate, and in some ways define the condition of modern existence. Whereas in Aristotle’s time, the border between the human and the nonhuman was relatively stable – the distinction between zoē and bios (i.e. creaturely and political life) is supposed to mark their difference – in modern society, the border is in constant need of rearticulation: what counts as “human” is never settled – new decisions have to be made constantly to eliminate the ambiguities that arise. “[As] Foucault has shown,” Agamben observes, “when the modern State, starting in the seventeenth century, began to include the care of the population’s life as one of its essential tasks, thus transforming its politics into biopolitics, it was by means of a progressive generalization and redefinition of the concept of vegetative life (now coinciding with the biological
heritage of the nation)" (O 15). What kind of life is considered human? How do we define the mad, the perverted, and the delinquent? At what point in the process of development or disintegration of the body is the body no longer a bearer of rights? As the modern biopolitical state attempts to answer these difficult questions, it is forced to repeatedly rearticulate the border between the human and the nonhuman. Today, biopolitics has developed to the point where a stable distinction between the human and the nonhuman no longer exists. With organ transplant, artificial respiration, and life-support technologies blurring the line between life and death, there is no longer a sphere of life outside the domain of the law. Gone are the days when the administration of zoē is limited to the domestic sphere of the oikos: as Agamben argues in Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, today “we no longer know anything of the classical distinction between zoē and bios, between private life and political existence, between man as a simple living being at home in the house and man’s political existence in the city” (HS 187). Human life in the modern state is reduced to bare life, “a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, physis and nomos, exclusion and inclusion” (HS 105). Hence the nomos of the modern state according to Agamben is that of the camp, the space where the human and the nonhuman enter into “a zone of indistinction” (HS 170). Clearly, something has to change. If Agamben’s diagnosis is right, if modern biopolitics indeed results from our Aristotelian inheritance, we will have to rethink the idea of the human to dig humanity out of its ruins. For if we do not figure out soon what it is that we are doing when we ceaselessly rearticulate the human/animal distinction, we will continue to reduce ourselves to a state of bare life that is neither human nor animal. In other words: without an ontological
revolution in the sphere of anthropogenesis, we will no longer be humans, we will only be *hominès sacri*.

II. The Anthropological Machine

What is it that we are really doing when we rearticulate the human/animal distinction? According to Agamben, there is something circular about the way humanity is defined: it is as if each time we try to define the human, we end up positing that which we seek to explain. In the eighteenth century, in a time when the discovery of tropical birds that speak and primates that behave like humans was making it difficult for humans to be defined purely through anatomical features, Linnaeus, the founder of modern scientific taxonomy, solved the problem by identifying *Homo sapiens* with “the old philosophical adage: *nosce te ipsum* {know thyself}” (*O* 25). This clever definition of *Homo sapiens*, Agamben says, shows how humanity for Linnaeus “has no specific identity other than the *ability* to recognize himself […] *man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human*” (*O* 26). Humanity here is neither a clearly-defined species nor a metaphysical substance: it is merely “a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human […] an optical machine constructed of a series of mirrors in which man, looking at himself, sees his own image always already deformed in the features of an ape” (*O* 26). Humans are apes, apes who happen to recognize themselves as apes. Nothing else separates the human from the animal except this optical trick.

If the human does not differ from the animal by virtue of having a specific quality but only by the fact that it recognizes itself as human, then language, which produces
recognition, explain how we differ from animals. The attempt to explain humanity through language leads us, however, to another problem: the problem of origin. When did proto-humans first acquire language to become humans proper? The idea that there is a prelinguistic stage of humanity haunts the idea of the human like a persistent shadow. “In identifying himself with language,” Agamben writes, “the speaking man places his own muteness outside of himself, as already and not yet human” (O 35). That this being who is “already and not yet human” is mere fiction, however, is made clear by the nineteenth century linguist, Heymann Steinthal. Steinthal reasoned that we must posit a prelinguistic stage of humanity because whatever first creates language cannot itself be language, but he points out that since this prelinguistic stage must be able to produce humanity, it must be posited as a species of the human rather than an animal (O 35-6). The proto-human is thus neither man nor beast: it is a shadow casts by language. “What distinguishes man from animal is language,” Agamben explains, “but this is not a natural given already inherent in the psychophysical structure of man; it is, rather, a historical production which, as such, can be properly assigned neither to man nor to animal” (O 36). The machine of anthropogenesis operates by presupposing a point of origin that is neither human nor animal, a zone of indistinction that is not a part of (yet lies at the heart of) the human/animal distinction. As Agamben puts it: “Insofar as the production of man through the opposition man/animal, human/inhuman, is at stake here, the machine necessarily functions by means of an exclusion (which is also always already a capturing) and an inclusion (which is also always already an exclusion). Indeed, precisely because the human is already presupposed every time, the machine actually produces a kind of state of exception, a zone of
indeterminacy in which the outside is nothing but the exclusion of an inside and the inside is in turn only the inclusion of an outside” (O 37). The human must always exclude the nonhuman in order to produce itself, yet through this very exclusion, the nonhuman is always included in the human as an outside. The human is therefore always already double, always already nonhuman. Like Linnaeus’ *homo sapiens*, there is no qualitative distinction here between the human and the nonhuman: their difference is produced solely through an illusion.

This machine that produces the human, according to Agamben, has existed since the times of antiquity. What has changed between now and then is not the machine itself, but *where* it posits the excluded middle (i.e. the shadow that is neither human nor nonhuman). Whereas the machine of the ancients produces the “outside” of the human by humanizing the animal as the “*enfant sauvage* or *homo ferus*, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner” (O 37), the machine of the moderns functions “by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human: *Homo alalus*, or the ape-man” (O 37). Both these machines, however, are alike in being “in truth, perfectly empty” (O 38). The human they produce is ultimately nothing more than “the place of a ceaselessly updated decision in which the caesurae and their rearticulation are always dislocated and displaced anew” (O 38). What is obtained by these machines in the end is “neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself – only a *bare life*” (O 38). Faced with this extreme figure, Agamben writes, “it is not so much a matter of asking which of the two machines (or of the two variants of the same machine)
is better or more effective [...] it is of understanding how they work so that we might, eventually, be able to stop them” (O 38). Our task, then, is to stop the machine so as to rethink the idea of humanity as an idea of a humanity to come after the suspension of the human/animal distinction. But the question is: how do we stop the machine? How do we end the human/animal distinction? Heidegger’s failure, Agamben says, is instructive.

III. The Open
In *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, a series of lectures given at Freiburg in the winter semester of 1929/30, Heidegger articulates a human-animal distinction that has since become his well-known thesis: the stone is worldless [weltlos], the animal is poor in world [weltarm], and the human is world-forming [weltbildend]. As was very much his intention, Heidegger here avoids categorizing the human as a rational animal, i.e. as a living being that has language. By using the concept of “world” to make his human/animal distinction, he follows his repeated warning in *Sein und Zeit* that “[das] Dasein wiederum ist ontologisch nie so zu bestimmen, daß man es ansetzt als Leben – (ontologisch unbestimmt) und als überdies noch etwas anderes” (SZ 67). Dasein, i.e. human existence, is not biological life plus something else: it is an engaged mode of being in the world. But what exactly is “world”? And why are animals “poor” in world compared to humans? Whether and to what extent Heidegger succeeds in escaping the grasp of the anthropological machine depends on how these questions are answered.

In his reading of Heidegger, Agamben highlights how Heidegger describes animal life as being in a state of “captivation” (Benommenheit). Animals according to Heidegger
do not interact with their surround through “apprehension” (vernehmen) but through “behavior” (benennen). They are “captivated” (benommen) by their environment because although they can respond to external stimuli with appropriate activity, these stimuli do not show themselves to the animals as beings. Beings are not revealed to animals: although animals have a surround (Umgebung), they do not have a world (Welt) – they interact with beings, but they do not enter into reflective relations with them. The surround of the animal is thus open yet opaque: “This openness without disconcealment distinguishes the animal’s poverty in world from the world-forming which characterizes man,” Agamben says (O 55). Humans are able to recognize beings as the disconcealment of Being, but animals do not. Although they are in the open, they do not see it. As Heidegger puts it in Parmenides: “Niemals kann ein Stein, sowenig ein Flugzeug, je der Sonne zu jubilierend sich erheben und sich erregen wie die Lerche, und dennoch sieht sie nicht das Offene” (O 58). Not even the lark sees the open. It does not apprehend what it sees.

By distinguishing the animal and the human in terms of behavior and apprehension, i.e. in their differing relation towards the open, Heidegger seems to secure a relatively stable border between human and animal life. The stability of this border, however, begins to look a lot more fragile once Heidegger examines Dasein. “The animal is at once open and not open,” Agamben writes, “– or, better, it is neither one nor the other: it is open in a nondisconcealment that, on the one hand, captivates and dislocates it in its disinhibitor with unmatched vehemence, and, on the other, does not in any way disconceal as a being that thing that holds it so taken and absorbed” (O 59). But it turns out that this quality of being “open in a nondisconcealment” is not unique to animals: it is also found in Dasein in
the fundamental attunement (*Stimmung*) of profound boredom (*tiefe Langeweile*). In other words, the animal is found inside the human as a hidden mode of relations that we experience when we are bored.

Now, Heidegger tries to downplay this proximity between the human and the animal in profound boredom. In the later parts of *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, he insists that the proximity between the human and the animal is merely apparent. Although “das Wesen der Tierheit, die Benommenheit, scheinbar in die nächste Nähe dessen rückt, was wir als ein Charakteristikum der tiefen Langeweile kennzeichnet,” he writes, “[…] Es wird sich freilich zeigen, daß diese nächste Nähe beider Wesensverfassungen nur täuschen kann, daß zwischen ihnen ein Abgrund liegt, der durch keine Vermittlung in irgendeinem Sinne überbrückt werden kann” (*GdM* 409). Agamben, however, does not let Heidegger off so easily: according to his reading, the structural parallel between profound boredom and animal existence reveals to us how “the openness of the human world […] can be achieved only by means of an operation enacted upon the not-open of the animal world” (*O* 62). Profound boredom, in other words, is the site of the operation that allows the animal to become the human.

Profound boredom according to Heidegger can be broken down into two “structural moments” (*Strukturmomente*). The first of these is being-left-empty (*Leergelassenheit*). Being-left-empty is the state of being that we experience when we walk back and forth, look around, and try to find diversions without really knowing what to do. In this state of being, we are held captive by things that, as Agamben puts it, “leave us completely indifferent, yet in such a way that we cannot free ourselves from them, because *we are*
riveted and delivered over to what bores us” (O 64). Now, being captivated by things that give us no possibility of action, things that close themselves off to us, is what Heidegger calls being “delivered over to beings that refuse themselves” (ausgeliefert an das sich im Ganzen versagende Seiende):

Das Dasein findet sich durch diese Langeweile gerade vor das Seiende im Ganzen gestellt, sofern in dieser Langeweile das Seiende, das uns umgibt, keine Möglichkeit des Tuns und keine Möglichkeit des Lassens mehr bietet. Es versagt sich im Ganzen hinsichtlich dieser Möglichkeiten. Es versagt sich so einem Dasein, das als solches inmitten dieses Seienden im Ganzen zu ihm sich verhält – zu ihm, zum Seienden im Ganzen, das sich jetzt versagt – sich verhalten muß, wenn anders es sein soll als das, was es ist. Das Dasein findet sich so ausgeliefert an das sich im Ganzen versagende Seiende. (GdM 211)

Now, this state of being “delivered over to something that refuses itself,” Agamben points out, displays the exact same structure as animal captivation (Benommenheit). “In being left empty by profound boredom,” he writes,

something vibrates like an echo of that ‘essential disruption’ that arises in the animal from its being exposed and taken in an ‘other’ that is, however, never revealed to it as such. For this reason the man who becomes bored finds himself in the ‘closest proximity’ – even if it is only apparent – to animal captivation. Both are, in their most proper gesture, open to a
closedness; they are totally delivered over to something that obstinately refuses itself. (O 65)

If Agamben’s reading is right, if the state of being-left-empty is indeed the human version of animal captivation, then profound boredom reveals an animal-like structure within the human. Even if there is an abyss dividing the human from the animal, the human is still bound to the animal as that which it excludes (and therefore include) from the inside.

Being-left-empty, however, is only the first structural moment of profound boredom. The other structural moment, being-held-in-suspense (Hingehaltenheit), is what takes Dasein beyond the sphere of the not-open towards the open proper. The key verb that Heidegger uses to describe the state of being-held-in-suspense is **brachliegen**, which, as Agamben points out, literally means “to leave fallow,” i.e. to leave something inactive, uncultivated, not actualized (O 66). When things refuse themselves in profound boredom, Heidegger says, it also makes manifest, by means of its self-withholding, the possibilities of what Dasein could do:

> Das Seiende im Ganzen ist gleichgültig geworden. Aber nicht nur das, in eins damit zeigt sich noch irgendetwas, geschieht das Aufdämmern der Möglichkeitkeiten, die das Dasein haben könnte, die aber gerade in diesen ‘es ist einem langweilig’ brachliegen, als brachliegende uns im Stich lassen. Wir sehen jedenfalls: Im Versagen liegt eine Verweisung auf anderes. Diese Verweisung ist das **Ansagen der brachliegenden Möglichkeitten.** (GdM 212)

What turns the not-open into the open, according to Heidegger’s analysis, is the announcement of possibilities that lie dormant or inactive in things that refuse themselves.
The deactivation of concrete possibilities in the first structural moment of profound boredom makes manifest the possible (das Ermöglichende) in the second structural moment. This event, Agamben says, is “the very origin of potentiality” (O 67). Dasein differs from animal life because it is able to apprehend possibilities in the non-disclosed. “The animal environment,” writes Agamben, is constituted in such a way that something like a pure possibility can never become manifest within it. Profound boredom then appears as the metaphysical operator in which the passage from poverty in world to world, from animal environment to human world, is realized; at issue here is nothing less than anthropogenesis, the becoming Da-sein of living man. (O 68)

Being-held-in-suspense, then, is the operation that originates human life. But that means that the human does not differ from the animal except through the optical trick of recognizing the closed. The not-open of the animal, Agamben explains, “is opened only by means of a suspension and a deactivation of the animal relation with the disinhibitor […] The open and the free-of-being do not name something radically other with respect to the neither-open-nor-closed of the animal environment: they are the appearing of an undisconcealed as such, the suspension and capture of the lark-not-seeing-the-open” (O 68). The human is the animal who recognizes its status as an animal, that is, it recognizes itself as captivated by the not-open. The openness of the human, as Agamben puts it, “is essentially the openness to a closedness, and whoever looks in the open sees only a closing, only a not-seeing” (O 68). In every apprehension of a being, in every moment of disclosure,
Dasein always experiences an “irresolvable struggle between unconcealedness and concealedness, between disconcealment and concealment […] between man and animal” (O 69). Dasein exists because it is the site of this conflict. It is neither human nor animal, but the ground in which both are placed in perpetual opposition.

The problem with this definition of the human is that it remains trapped in the logic of strife and division. Since humanity is obtained “only through a suspension of animality and must thus keep itself open to the closedness of animality,” there is an implicit “metaphysical primacy of animalitas” in Heidegger’s thought, an implicit need to conceive Dasein as animal life plus something else (O 73). For all its subtleties, Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein as the site of a conflict between disconcealment and concealment, between the openness of the human world and the closedness of the animal surround, is, in the end, yet another articulation of the human-animal scission that we see at work in Aristotle’s De Anima. Despite dispensing with the idea of the rational animal, Heidegger continues to divide life by excluding the closed from the open, thus including it as strife. Clearly, to stop the machine, it is not enough to dispense with the idea of the rational animal: the idea of a strife between man and animal itself must be neutralized. Only through this neutralization of the human-animal strife is it possible to escape the violent course of Western metaphysics. Only two scenarios, Agamben says, are possible at this point: either we continue to govern the animal through technology, or we appropriate our animality as that which “neither remains hidden nor is made an object of mastery, but is thought as such, as pure abandonment” (O 80). The former option is what gives us modern biopolitics. The latter, meanwhile, leads us towards what Agamben calls the “Shabbat” of animal and man.
IV. The Shabbat of Animal and Man

In the final pages of *Einbahnstraße*, in a section bearing the title of “Zum Planetarium,” Walter Benjamin makes the following observation on how humanity ought to conceive their relationship to nature:


What Benjamin suggests in this passage is an idea of humanity that is neither mastering nature, nor mastered by it, nor dialectically synthesizing both terms. “What is decisive here is only the ‘between,’ the interval or, we might say, the play between the two terms, their immediate constellation in a non-coincidence,” Agamben writes (*O* 83). What is at stake, to put it another way, is the possibility of an articulation of man and nature that no longer produces the human “through the suspension and capture of the inhuman” (*O* 83). Instead of ceaselessly excluding or suppressing animality, man and nature is to be placed in a
relationship of non-oppositional juxtaposition that Benjamin calls the “dialectic at a standstill” (O 83). This way of conceiving the human-animal relation, Agamben says, can be compared to the sexual fulfillment of lovers, for in the “extreme vicissitude of sensual pleasure,” the satisfied human body “frees itself of its mystery in order to, so to speak, recognize a nonnature” within nature (O 83). The example that Agamben uses to illustrate this recognition of a nonnature within nature is the late Titian painting, *Nymph and Shepherd*. The lovers depicted in this work, Agamben says,

learn something of each other that they should not have known – they have lost their mystery – and yet have not become any less impenetrable […] in this mutual disenchantment from their secret, they enter […] a new and more blessed life, one that is neither animal nor human. It is not nature that is reach in their fulfillment, but rather […] a higher stage beyond both nature and knowledge, beyond concealment and disconcealment. These lovers have initiated each other into their own lack of mystery as their most intimate secret; they mutually forgive each other and expose their *vanitas* […] As is clear from both the posture of the two lovers and the flute taken from the lips, their condition is *otium*, it is workless […] the lovers who have lost their mystery contemplate a human nature rendered perfectly inoperative – the inactivity (*inoperosità*) and *deseuvrement* of the human and of the animal as the supreme and unsavable figure of life. (O 87)

Although Agamben’s description of the lovers in *Nymph and Shepherd* is not exactly precise, we can extrapolate a list of traits that characterizes his idea of the new human. Like
the satisfied lovers in Titian’s painting, the new human must lack mystery and yet remain impenetrable – they must be neither concealed nor disconcealed. In a sense, they are not human because they have “forgotten every rational element, every project for mastering its animal life,” nor are they animal, because they do not remain “simply closed in [their] own captivation” (O 90). As a figure of human nature that has been rendered inoperative, the new humans must have neither work nor destiny nor ends. Rather than contrasting themselves to animals, they must expose the emptiness of such contrasts and show themselves to be without an essential trait. “To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man,” Agamben writes, “will […] mean no longer to seek new – more effective or more authentic – articulations, but rather to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that – within man – separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man” (O 92). If Heidegger conceives of Dasein as the suspension of the animal, then the new human, as the suspension of this suspension, is in effect an abandonment of Dasein and its world-building mode of existence. Whatever being is brought forth after this abandonment of Dasein, whatever body emerges after this neutralization of the human and the animal – that is the figure of the coming human that Agamben challenges us to imagine if we wish to free ourselves of the violence of the anthropological machine.

But how we are to achieve this? How are we to bring about the “Shabbat” of the human and the animal in a world where both are reduced to bare life? Agamben provides us with no definite answers to such questions in The Open: he leaves us wondering what it would be like for us to become a human without projects, to exist purely as means without
ends. Fortunately, Agamben is less vague in his more recent writings: the idea of a post-
anthropological humanity that *The Open* merely gestures at is explained more fully in *Pulcinella: or, Entertainment for Kids in Four Scenes*, a study of the enigmatic *commedia dell’arte* figure that appears in many of Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo’s frescoes and drawings. “Pulcinella’s body,” Agamben writes,

is no longer, as in Western metaphysics, the animal presupposed to the human. He breaks the false articulation between the simply living being and the human, between the body and *logos*. The anthropological machine of the West is jammed. This is why his body – at once cheerful and deformed, neither fully human nor truly animal – is so difficult to define. Pulcinella is nothing other than the delight that a body receives from its being in contact with itself and with other bodies – nothing than a certain use of bodies.

(*Pulcinella* 117)

The jamming of the anthropological machine, the suspension of the suspension, the Shabbat of animal and man – all these syntagma point towards a new mode of living, a new relationship towards the body that the comic figure of Pulcinella is supposed to exemplify. If we wish to live our lives like the satisfied lovers in Titian’s painting, we must learn to inhabit our body like Pulcinella. What is at stake in the idea of the post-anthropological human is nothing more than a certain use of bodies, a certain use of bodies that can be summarized in one word: *play*.

In the next section, we will examine how the concept of the play connects the idea of the aesthetic human in Schiller with Agamben’s notion of the post-anthropological
human. As we shall see, for both authors, the concept of play is not be understood as the mere termination of work but as a very specific configuration of the relationship between the potentiality and the actualization of our deeds. Both authors, in fact, are responding to the same problem in Kant’s practical philosophy, namely, the problem of agency arising from the distinction between our empirical and intelligible characters. Unlike Eugen Fink (2010), who sees play as an operation of world-disclosure, Schiller and Agamben define play as a special relationship that we have to our bodies when we act neither from duty nor inclination, neither through will nor instinct. Play for them is a mode of being, a way of inhabiting our deeds outside the juridical sphere of responsible actions. What is essential here is neither leisure nor beauty nor grace: it is a matter of surplus movement, an excess of gesture, a signature called “form-of-life.”

Chapter 3.2 – Play

I. Surplus and Potential

When we think of play, we normally think of it as the opposite of work. This sets up a binary opposition where play and work are viewed as negative counterparts: if work requires effort, play is effortless, if work is heavy, play is light, if work is necessary, play is contingent, etc. Schiller seems to think this way when he writes in Letter XXVII of the Ästhetische Briefe: “Das Tier arbeitet, wenn ein Mangel die Triebfeder seiner Tätigkeit ist, und es spielt, wenn der Reichtum der Kraft diese Triebfeder ist, wenn das überflüssige Leben sich selbst zur Tätigkeit stachelt” (TS 669). Work is driven by a lack (“ein Mangel”), while play is driven by an excess of life (“der Reichtum der Kraft” or “das überflüssige
Leben”). That makes it sound as if there are two ways of acting: either we act out of need and therefore work, or we act from exuberance and therefore play. It is all very formal. Nothing so far suggests a dialectic movement.

Now, animals, according to Schiller’s definition, can play just as well as humans. The example that he uses to illustrate this is the roar of a physically satisfied lion. “Wenn den Löwen kein Hunger nagt, und kein Raubtier zum Kampf herausfodert, so erschafft sich die müßige Stärke selbst einen Gegenstand; mit mutvollem Gebrüll erfüllt er die hallende Wüste, und in zwecklosem Aufwand genießt sich die üppige Kraft,” Schiller writes (TS 668-9). But it is not just humans and animals that can play: non-sentient organisms such as plants can play as well. When the tree spreads its roots, branches, and foliage to absorb more nutrition that it needs to sustain itself, it is in a way also playing, since its movement exceeds that which is necessary for its physical sustenance (TS 669). What constitutes play is thus not the negation of work but the transgression of its means-end structure through a surplus of movement, i.e. a movement exceeding the requirements of biological function. Nature is filled with such examples, Schiller says: “Von dem Zwang des Bedürfnisses oder dem physischen Ernst nimmt [die Natur] durch den Zwang des Überflusses oder das physische Spiel den Übergang zum ästhetischen Spiele und ehe sie sich in der hohen Freiheit des Schönen über die Fessel jedes Zweckes erhebt, nähert sie sich dieser Unabhängigkeit wenigstens von ferne schon in der freien Bewegung, die sich selbst Zweck und Mittel ist” (TS 669). Play thus signifies a “free movement” that is not a means to an end, but either a means that is itself also an end (“das physische Spiel”) or a means that is without any end (“das ästhetische Spiel”). The opposition between work and play is not as
simple as it initially appears. Work must precede play, since play is only possible when work is done. But play is not the negation of work: it is the possibility of movement that arises in the absence of work, the potential for an activity that is free of teleological functions.

Natural beings such as humans, animals, and plants are all capable of play because they are all able capable of making surplus physical movements. But what about the transcendental subject? It, too, Schiller says, is capable of play, since it can bring about a “freie Bewegung” of the imagination through the association of ideas “ohne alle Beziehung auf Gestalt” (TS 669). This “materielles Spiel” of the imagination, however, is one-sided: “Insofern sich noch gar nichts von Form in diese Phantasiespiele mischt, und eine ungezwungene Folge von Bildern den ganzen Reiz derselben ausmacht, gehören sie [diese Phantasiespiele], obgleich sie dem Menschen allein zukommen können, bloß zu seinem animalischen Leben und beweisen bloß seine Befreiung von jedem äußern sinnlichen Zwang, ohne noch auf eine selbständige bildende Kraft in ihm schließen zu lassen” (TS 669-70). The free association of images and ideas only activates the subject’s non-legislative half; the other half, “der gesetzgebende Geist,” is only at play when the subject makes “den Sprung zum ästhetischen Spielen” through the introduction of “form” (TS 670). Whereas material play only requires associative thinking, in aesthetic play, reason “legt seine Selbständigkeit in das Wandelbare und seine Unendlichkeit in das Sinnliche” (TS 670). Freedom of movement in aesthetic play arises not from the imagination by itself, but from the imagination as it relates itself to the form of the perceived object. “Form” is Schiller’s term for that which appears when the object is stripped of work: it is another
name for the non-conceptual manifestation of a thing, the appearance of a thing as that which is open because it is not bound by specific functions. Just as the roar of a lion creates a sound that exceeds what is necessary for its form of life, the movement of the imagination in aesthetic play generates an image that exceeds what is necessary for a concept. In the former case, what is idle or without work is the body of the satisfied lion; in the latter case, it is form.

Form is always idle because it is that which exceeds conceptual categorization. It is the surplus movement of thought in perceptual experience, the manifestation of a thing in the state of idleness. Since the thing in this state has no use, it opens itself up to new possible uses. Form thus makes manifest the potentiality of the de-activated thing. A classic example of this is the toy. Unlike everyday objects, toys have no specific functions. The doll and the toy-truck have no telos to fulfill: they lend themselves to play because they appear as idle and therefore open to possible uses. The child is free to endow her toys with any function she wishes. Technically, anything can become a toy because anything can be deprived of its function and open itself up to new uses. When a child plays with her food, for example, she is deactivating the food’s function and turning it into something that she can manipulate, experiment, or use without a particular end in mind. To play with something is to treat it as pure means, to turn it into a toy. What unites form and toy is their openness for new determinations. Just as the child is free to endow the toy with whatever function pleases her, the spectating subject is free to grant new configurations of meaning to the thing that it perceives as mere form. In both cases, potentiality coincides without
remainder with the suspension of work. So long as a thing is regarded as mere potential, mere determinability without determination, it lends itself to play.

So far, we have seen three different kinds of playing: (1) the play of natural or physical beings whose movement exceeds that which is necessary for its form of life, (2) the play of the imagination when it freely associates images or ideas without reference to the “Gestalt” of the perceived thing, and (3) the play of aesthetic experience when it recognizes the form of a thing as that which resists teleological categorization. Which of these is what Schiller has in mind when he proclaims “der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt” (TS 614)? The third definition seems to be the best fit of the three, since it involves both the material and the form of a thing. But the aesthetic human is not a spectating subject – she is an embodied living being. What she requires is not the experience of play, but play as a way of living. To become aesthetic humans, it is not enough that we recognize one another as indeterminate beings. We must also learn to inhabit our bodies as the site of a surplus potential. To see why this is so, we need to take a couple of steps back.

In Letter XI, Schiller argues that the human can be regarded in two different ways: as that which remains unchanging (“Person”) and as that which continually changes (“Zustand”) (TS 592). This separation of person and condition, however, is the result of abstract thinking, a consequence of metaphysical dualism. Now, in Letter XV, Schiller defines the object of the Sachtrieb as “Leben,” the object of the Formtrieb as “Gestalt,” and the object of the Spieltrieb as “lebende Gestalt” (TS 609). “Schönheit,” which Schiller identifies with “lebende Gestalt,” is what takes place when “Leben” and “Gestalt” are
unified as one (TS 609). When applied to humans, however, “Schönheit” is always double, for humans can be beautiful *qua* subject or *qua* object. Hence, in Letter XV, Schiller says that in order to become aesthetic “der Mensch soll mit der Schönheit *nur spielen*, und er soll *nur mit der Schönheit spielen*” (TS 614). He emphasizes here the difference between the agent and the patient: on the one hand, we should only *play*, on the other hand, we should become *that which we play*. The aesthetic human is aesthetic both as the subject and the object of play. To become aesthetic, then, what is needed is not just a new way of interacting with things, but also a new way of interacting with the self. Aesthetic experience only addresses the former: it only teaches us how to experience things as toys. The latter, however, is the more difficult task. How do we become the object of our own playing? How do we inhabit our body (that is our animality, our creatureliness) as that which is inseparable from our person, as that which gives form to our existence? The true challenge to becoming aesthetic lies not in the process of subjectivation that occurs through aesthetic experience, but in the process of de-subjectivation that occurs when we become a living form (“lebende Gestalt”). In some ways, the roar of a satisfied lion and the excessive growth of a tree’s foliage are more emblematic of the aesthetic human than *Juno Ludovisi*’s stoic self-containment. Schiller is not asking us to become a human without content: he is asking us to exist as a unity of form and life. Life is to become form and form is to become life. “Play” here means the identification of the surplus potential as that which gives shape to existence.

It needs to be stressed that the aesthetic human is not to be confused with what Schiller calls the beautiful soul (“die schöne Seele”). Schiller describes the beautiful soul
in Über Anmut und Würde as a person who has so internalized the moral law that she is affectively inclined to act in accordance with its precepts: in situations where a moral action does not involve suffering or sacrifice, the beautiful soul is said to act with “grace” because she willfully does her duty with joy; in situations where a moral action involves suffering or sacrifice, she is said to act with “dignity” because she willfully does her duty, albeit with sorrow. Essential to the concept of the beautiful soul is the idea of acting in accordance with a rational will. The idea of a rational will, however, is incompatible with play, for it requires deeds to be represented as a means to an end. To act according to a rational will is to act towards an end. Grace and dignity both describe the quality of willful actions. But play is not a means to an end: it is the possibility of movement that arises after the abolition of all means-end relations. Technically, it is neither an action nor a passion, but a way of inhabiting the body. In play, the body is used but it is not mastered – it exercises its potential without subsuming itself under a specific function. Whereas the beautiful soul is said to be “beautiful” because her will has so thoroughly mastered her body that it no longer appears as a constraint, the aesthetic human is “beautiful” because she refuses to separate her will from her body, so that there really is no constraint. What is at stake in the former is the appearance of a unified agency; what is at stake in the latter is the coincidence of agency and non-agency. The distinction is subtle but crucial: unified agency is a totalization of the will over the body, but the coincidence of agency and non-agency is the suspension of the human/animal distinction that fuels the violence of the anthropological machine.
Schiller sometimes speak of the aesthetic human as a regulative idea of reason that one measures oneself against or projects onto the future as an infinite task. In Letter XIV, to cite but one example, he describes the idea of humanity as “ein unendliches, dem [der Mensch] sich im Laufe der Zeit immer mehr nähern kann, aber ohne es jemals zu erreichen” (TS 606). But this way of thinking about the human is not consistent with how Schiller defines play. The idea of an infinite task makes it sound as if one could progress incrementally towards becoming an aesthetic human, as if becoming aesthetic was a matter of cultivating oneself through Bildung. As we have seen, however, play is not something that we can strive after since it is only possible through the suspension of work. No amount of Bildung can bring about the suspension of work for Bildung itself is work (it involves teleological progression, and all teleological progressions are antithetical to the logic of play). By positing the aesthetic human as an infinite task, Schiller undermines what the concept of play demands: the abolishment of means-end reasoning. The challenge that Schiller fails to surmount in the Ästhetische Briebe is how to think of play as a way of living without prescribing it as a destiny or a regulative idea. Fortunately, he does better in Über Naïve und Sentimentalische Dichtung. Although he does not make any reference to the aesthetic human in this work, he provides us with an implicit example of the aesthetic human that is not projected onto the future as a regulative idea. The example is found in his discussion of comedies. Comedy, it turns out, is the key to becoming human in the full sense of the term. The statement is both surprising and not surprising: not surprising because comedy has much to do with play, but surprising because Schiller did not write a single comedy and is not exactly known to have much to say about the genre.
II. Comedy

In the posthumous fragment titled “Tragödie und Komödie” (a text that has been passed down to us as part of the author’s oft-neglected Nachlaß), Schiller describes the difference between comedies and tragedies as follows: “Das Gemüt in Freiheit zu setzen erzielen beide, die Komödie leistet es aber durch die moralische Indifferenz, die Tragödie durch die Autonomie” (TS 1047). He elaborates what he means by “moralische Indifferenz” in the next sentence: “In der Komödie muß alles von dem moralischen Forum auf das physische gespielt werden, denn das moralische erlaubt keine Indifferenz. Behandelt die Komödie etwas, was unser moralisches Gefühl interessiert, so liegt ihr ob, es zu neutralisieren, d.i. es in die Klasse natürlicher Dinge zu versetzen, welche nach der Kausalität notwendig erfolgen” (TS 1047). Comedies, according to this definition, differs from tragedies because it presents everything as determined by physical necessity. Unlike tragic heroes, comic figures do not have a will. They have a character, that is to say, they are conditioned to act in a certain way when placed in a certain situation, but because their character is determined, not autonomous, we do not view them as responsible for their deeds. We do not make moral judgments on comic figures: we view them as blameless, like madmen and children. Comedies create a space where there are no oughts, only facts, no doers, only deeds. They free us from the burden of having to impute guilt and responsibility into every action. If Molière’s Tartuffe is successful, Schiller says, it is because we do not judge the hypocrite in comedies to be morally objectionable: Tartuffe’s deception of others is
laughable ("lächerlich"), not abhorrent (TS 1047-8).40 In comedies, human deeds show themselves as absurd yet laugh-worthy. The lightness and clarity of mind obtained in watching comedies is in a way quasi-divine: “Unser Zustand in der Komödie ist ruhig, klar, frei, heiter,” Schiller claims, “wir fühlen uns weder tätig noch leidend, wir schauen an und alles bleibt außer uns; dies ist der Zustand der Götter, die sich um nichts menschliches bekümmern, die über allem frei schweben, die kein Schicksal berührt, die kein Gesetz zwingt” (TS 1048).

Although it is not certain when Schiller wrote the “Tragödie und Komödie” fragment, scholars speculate that it was written around 1792-3, a few years before he began work on Über Naïve und Sentimentalische Dichtung.41 The discussion of comedy found in the latter work does not differ too significantly from what is said in the fragment; nevertheless, there are important differences in emphasis. Whereas in the fragment Schiller emphasizes the mode of judgment that allows the audience to observe deeds with a “Zustand” that is “ruhig, klar, frei, [und] heiter,” in Über Naïve und Sentimentalische Dichtung, Schiller stresses the contrast between the observer and the observed. Comedies, he says, is a subcategory of “satyrische Dichtung,” which in turn is a subcategory of “sentimentalische Dichtung.” Sentimental poetry differs from naïve poetry in reflecting the gap between the actual (“Wirklichkeit”) and the ideal (“Ideale”) (TS 739). In satirical

40 Schiller actually criticizes Molière for defending Tartuffe on the moral ground that it teaches us to recognize hypocrisy. In truth, however, it is likely that Molière only half-believes in his theory of moral improvement through comedies – the need to defend his work against the religious critics of his times was probably motivated by a pragmatic, not philosophical, concern.

41 For more information on this text fragment, see Lesley Sharpe’s “Schiller’s Fragment ‘Tragödie und Komödie’” in The Modern Language Review, vol. 81, no. 1, 1986, pp. 116-122.
poetry. Schiller says, the actual shows itself “als Mangel” whereas the ideal is “als höchsten Realität gegenüber gestellt” (TS 741). But satirical poetry can either be “strafend” or “scherzend.” It is “strafend” when it depicts the actual as an object of judgment that evokes moral interest, it is “scherzend” when it depicts the actual as an object of reflection that leaves us indifferent (TS 740-1). Comedies belong to the latter category (“scherzend”) because they leave us indifferent. When we watch a comedy, we suspend our moral judgment and accept all deeds as mere facts. Although tragedies and comedies are alike in presenting the actual as lacking compared to the ideal, the way they present this lack is very different. Whereas tragedies employ serious subject matters to generate moral interest that is then sublated through the sublime; “in der Komödie,” Schiller says, “geschieht durch den Gegenstand nichts und alles durch den Dichter” (TS 744). What we treasure in comedies, in other words, is not what is depicted onstage, but the mood of carefree lightness (“Leichtigkeit”) pervading the depiction. “Diese Freiheit des Gemüts in uns hervorzubringen und zu nähren,” Schiller remarks, “ist die schöne Aufgabe der Komödie […] In der Komödie […] muß immer verhütet werden, daß es niemals zu [einer] Aufhebung der Gemütsfreiheit komme” (TS 744).

For Schiller, then, what differentiatescomedies from tragedies is not the subject matter presented on the stage but the attitude that colors how it is presented. “Nicht das Gebiet aus welchem der Gegenstand genommen, sondern das Forum vor welches der Dichter ihn bringt, macht denselben tragisch oder komisch,” he writes (TS 745). Whereas in tragedies, the lack of the actual is presented as something that needs to be redeemed through the sublime, in comedies the lack is presented as beautiful and therefore – it is not
said, but implied – not truly a lack. The comic attitude affirms the lack as that which is not lacking, as that which needs not be saved. When comedies are successful, Schiller says, they make tragedies superfluous: “Wenn also die Tragödie von einem wichtigeren Punkt ausgeht, so muß man auf der andern Seite gestehen, daß die Komödie einem wichtigeren Ziel entgegen geht, und sie würde, wenn sie es erreichte, alle Tragödie überflüssig und unmöglich machen” (TS 745). The comic makes the tragic superfluous because the goal of the tragic (“Gemütsfreiheit”) is the very starting point of the comic. Comedies begin when the tragic is no longer possible, when there is no more conflict to be had between the actual and the ideal. What the comic attitude does is it renders the gap between the actual and the ideal inoperative: the gap is still there, but it does not generate a conflict because there is neither an attempt to actualize the ideal (through the actions onstage) nor an attempt to idealize the actual (through the interest of the spectator). Onstage, nobody is responsible for their deeds, and offstage, the spectator is in a state of constant disinterest. The gap is left alone. If the attempt to close the gap is what generates tragic conflicts, then what enables comedies is the leaving-alone of the gap. The comic attitude accepts the actual as what it is and not as that which needs to be saved. What Schiller calls “Gemütsfreiheit” is an outcome of accepting the actual as beautiful. “Beauty” here does not signify harmony or perfection: it signifies the affirmation of the banal as that which needs not be redeemed.

Schiller himself does not seem to be aware of the importance of comedy for his theory of play since he never tries to connect these two concepts. Nevertheless, what he writes about comedy is clearly relevant for the idea of the aesthetic human. If “play” describes the purposive movement of a body without a purpose, then in comedies, there
are no actions, only play. Comic figures literally play their roles. Unlike tragic heroes, they do not imitate unities of action that express rational agency. Comic deeds are not the manifestations of a will but the side-effects of a condition. All great comic figures are fundamentally pathological: their deeds do not unfold a subject behind the deed. When we view the world with a comic attitude, we view it as filled with deeds yet absent of subjects. When we act with a comic attitude, we perform our deeds as the side-effects of our conditions. The comic attitude transposed onto the realm of praxis is a process of de-subjectivation through the affirmation of material necessity. This affirmation is not the result of a will but that of love: what is affirmed is that we are as we are, that our deeds should be thus rather than not be. There is no decision of the will here, no freedom of choice: there is only a “Leichtigkeit” that remains after the body has lost its mystery, after its movements have been freed of all work and tasks so as to become play.

The comic attitude is the attitude that the aesthetic human has towards its body. If what constitutes comedies is the affirmation of the actual as that which is non-ideal and unsavable, then what constitutes the attitude of the aesthetic human is the affirmation of the body as that which is irredeemably ungovernable and incapable of action. But how can a body voluntarily move and yet be incapable of action? How can a human being make a deed her own and yet not be regarded as the subject or master? Although the concept of the comic attitude brings us closer to understanding what it means to be an aesthetic human, it remains murky at this point how the comic attitude can provide us with a concrete way to live our lives. Without resorting to a moral judgment of some sort, there is no way of establishing a person’s character. Without separating the person from the condition, there
is no way of grounding a stable sense of identity for the “self.” And yet to think the aesthetic human is to think a form of living that does not separate the person from the condition. The idea of the aesthetic human requires us to imagine a figure of the human beyond the dualism of subject and object, or doer and deed. This is where Pulcinella enters the picture. Schiller never quite succeeded in providing us with anything more than abstract schemas pointing us towards the idea of the aesthetic human. Pulcinella, however, is a figure that makes this idea concrete. What makes Pulcinella unique is not the fact that he is a comic character: it is the fact that he incarnates the comic attitude without the need to have a character. “Pulcinella,” Agamben writes, “is the ceremonious farewell of every character; he is able simply to live the unlived without either assuming it as a destiny or comically imitating it. He lives a life beyond any bios [...]” (P 107). Pulcinella, in other words, is not a person. He is an aesthetic human: “he is born, he plays, he falls in love, he gets married, he has a child, he travels, he practices many trades, he gets arrested, he is tried, he is condemned to death, he is shot, he is hanged, he gets sick, he dies, he is buried, and, finally, he contemplates his tomb” (P 107). His form, in short, is nothing more and nothing less than the sum of his deeds.

III. Pulcinella

Agamben’s *Pulcinella, or, Entertainment for Kids in Four Scenes* is a difficult book to describe. On the one hand, it appears to be a sustained reflection on a series of drawings of the *commedia dell’arte* figure that Giandomenico Tiepolo produced towards the end of his life. On the other hand, the book is a capricious mix of various texts and images: instead
of a sustained argument, we are presented with a dazzling concoction of imagined
dialogues and biographical sketches, historical anecdotes and philosophical musings,
images not only by Giandomenico, but also by Gianbattista Tiepolo, Francesco Goya,
Tristano Martinelli, etc. It is the sort of work that is impossible to summarize, for although
it can be said to have an overarching trajectory, there is no thesis for the reader to hold
onto, no central argumentative position for the reader to grasp. Like Pulcinella, the “form”
of the work here is nothing more and nothing less than the sum of its parts. Whereas most
books have a “plot” that ties the parts together into a whole, this book is a whole because
it digresses – it is defined by digression.

Pulcinella, too, is a figure defined by digression. He is who he is because of his
ability to constantly disrupt the plot. “Despite the stereotypical pretense of a plot,”
Agamben writes,

in the comedy of Pulcinella there is only parabasis. Pulcinella does not act
in a play; he has always already interrupted it, has always already left it, by
means of a shortcut or a byway. He is pure parabasis: an exit from the scene,
from history, from the silly, flimsy story in which one would like to contain
him. In the life of humans – and this is his teaching – the only important
thing is to find an escape route. Leading where? To the origin. Because the
origin lies in the middle; it exists only as an interruption. (P 43)

What does it mean to find an “escape route” to an origin that “exists only as an
interruption”? It is Agamben’s way of saying: Pulcinella exists neither inside nor outside
the plot. Pulcinella exists in the in-between space constituted by the disruption of the
inside/outside distinction. This is why he is pure parabasis. Parabasis in ancient comedies, as Agamben points out, only takes place “after the action had been halted and the actors had left the scene” (P 41). It is the moment when the actors take off their masks to break the barrier between the stage and the spectator so as to return to their original state as “a cheerful, tumultuous, insolent Dionysiac procession” (P 41). Origin here is connected to the semi-feral and the sub-human, but it is not chronologically prior to the human: it lies “in the middle.” If the human is secured by banishing the animal to an outside that nevertheless remains inside, then the origin is what takes place when the banished returns as an interruption of the inside/outside distinction. It is what emerges when we interrupt the “plot” of the human, along with the separations of the human and animal, the person and the condition, the will and the body, etc. Seen in this light, origin is what enables play. Pulcinella constantly plays because he is always digressing, always stepping towards the origin, always interrupting the plot. He is an aesthetic human because he is an escape route. He shows us that there is always an exit, that the machine can be jammed.

The “lazzo” in commedia dell’arte is a quasi-improvised comic routine that is normally inserted in between the scenes of a plot. Comic acts, Agamben says, have a tendency to become lazzi because the essence of the comic is not action (praxeōn) but character (ēthos). In a lasso, acts are turned “into senseless actions and gestures whose aim is solely to interrupt the action and free the character from ever being held responsible” (P 48). The idea is similar to what Schiller calls “moralische Indifferenz”: instead of presenting deeds as acts that are imputable to a rational agent, the lasso presents them as senseless movements, the mere side-effects of a material condition. This is what sets tragic
heroes apart from comic characters: “Since the tragic hero could have acted differently, the
error [hamartia] consigns him to a destiny and a guilt; the errancy [hamartēma] of the
comic instead gives him over only to a character” (P 48-9). Regarded from a certain angle,
Pulcinella is undeniably a comic character. “That someone or something is irreparably as
it is: this is Pulcinella,” Agamben writes (P 49). Seen in a different light, however,
Pulcinella is not a comic character at all since he is “not a noun; he is an adverb; he is not
a what but a how […] Pulcinella is beyond both fate and character” (P 49). He is not a
character because he is an escape route – everything he does is pure lazzo. “Pulcinella
cannot take off his mask, because there is no face behind it,” Agamben remarks. “That is
to say, he calls into question the false dialectic between face and mask that has
compromised the theatre and, along with it, the ethics of the West” (P 55-6). Instead of
having an intelligible character behind the empirical phenomena of deeds, Pulcinella
interrupts the separation of the intelligible and the empirical. He “liquidates every
‘personal’ problem, dismisses every theology” (P 56). In him, not only do “uniqueness and
generality enter into a threshold of indistinction” but also “the flesh-and-blood individual
and his or her mask” (P 57).

One of the drawings that Agamben spends some time reflecting upon is the drawing
of Pulcinella being placed on a trial. Giandomenico in fact sketched a series of images
around this event: there is a picture of Pulcinella being placed under arrest, a picture of him
in court, and a picture of him being hanged. But why does Pulcinella have to undergo a
trial? Why must he be judged? According to Agamben, it is because “only after being
subjected to the sanctioned forms of law, only after being judged, sentenced and put to
death can Pulcinella truly be as he is” (P 64). Pulcinella is what remains after the trial, after the enforcement of the law. “The lazzo is not a chargeable action, it entails no responsibility – it is a pure, irreparable how, with neither substance nor moral person. If I am only a character, a signature, a how, then I can in no way be defined by or charged with this character: it is what I ceaselessly shed in the hands of the law, without thereby assuming or denying it” (P 64). The lazzo makes us laugh, Agamben says, because “the action of which it consists is cancelled in the very act in which it is achieved” (P 65). Pulcinella incarnates the lazzo as body and flesh. He shows “what a body can do when every action has become impossible” and bears testimony to the fact “that there is still politics beyond or before action” (P 65). If Pulcinella represents an idea, it is the idea of a post-legal politics. But what is this politics? How can there be politics “beyond or before action”?

The politics of the West is inherently juridical. It expresses itself most clearly in the distinction that Kant makes between the intelligible and the empirical characters of the human. “The intelligible character is nothing but another name for the will,” Agamben writes. “That is to say, the point is to guarantee the responsibility of human actions, to ensure that the subject can answer before the law (both moral and juridical) for that which appears not to be free from the point of view of the empirical character” (P 112). Essentially, Kant is telling all of us: “You are responsible not for what you do but for what you are” (P 112). This juridical conception of human agency is what eventually paves the way for Auschwitz: “the Jews – and Gypsies, but ultimately anyone – are responsible not for what they do but for what they are” (P 114). The human who is responsible for her being is the human who is put on constant trial. Kantian freedom places us under a state of
permanent guilt. The story, however, only makes sense if we believe, as Kant and Plato invite us to believe, that we have in some ways “chosen” our intelligible character (the myth of Er in Book X of The Republic and the postulates of practical reason in the Second Critique play the same role of legitimizing our responsibility for being who we are). But this is precisely what Pulcinella protests against. “Pulcinella’s body – his mask – expresses the absolute lack of all will and all character, his being caught at every instant in flagrant, intransigent, blameless abulia […] His gesture is the liberation of the empirical character from any reference to an intelligible character, and of the intelligible character from any function of moral or legal imputation” (P 115). What Pulcinella teaches us is this: “I am not to blame for the features of my body, my nose, my belly, my hump. I am innocent of all of it. Ethics begins right after this, but not somewhere else […] what is ethical is the way in which I live the affection that I receive from being in relation to it, how I renounce or make mine this nose, this belly, this hump. In a word: how I smile at them” (P 115).

Pulcinella teaches us how to “smile” at our body, how to adopt the comic attitude in the way we inhabit ourselves so as not to be subjugated under a juridical model of action. He bears witness to the fact that deeds need not be action, that life is thinkable without guilt.

Pulcinella exemplifies a way of looking at life. When Giandomenico produced his 104 drawings of Pulcinella, he was in a way also looking back at his own life – and smiling. “It is in looking back on his own life that the seventy-year-old painter realizes that he has lived it and that he would like to live it like Pulcinella, without inquiring into its meaning, its outcome or its failure: simply to live it, immediately, immemorially – contemplating it, so to speak, with his eyes closed,” Agamben writes (P 122). To look back at one’s life and
smile, to not ask for meaning, to live it without judgment, simply and immediately – all this describes a certain idea of the human, a certain idea of living. Ultimately, Pulcinella is an idea. However, he is not an idea that one projects onto the future as an infinite task. Pulcinella is an idea that one grasps – only then does life begin. To grasp this idea is to grasp the idea of the aesthetic human. Nothing changes after the grasping, yet everything is different. After the “smile” of the comic attitude, there is no more secret, no more guilt, and no more constant trial. Life goes on as before, yet it is illuminated differently. It is as if there is a certain halo, a certain signature of “Leichtigkeit” and “Gemütsfreiheit” that shines on everything, making it less heavy, less serious, less violent.

The technical term that Agamben uses to describe the life that Pulcinella exemplifies is “form-of-life.” Form-of-life signifies a life beyond the dualism of life and law. When life is contrasted with law or norms, it is reduced to bare life, an empty biological state that we must administrate to make it conform to norms. The idea of a form-of-life challenges this juridical view of life. Form-of-life, Agamben says, is “a way of life that has as its object only its own bodily life, which our political tradition has always already separated out into bare life” (P 128). Pulcinella displays form-of-life, for in him, “there is no vegetative life separated from form of life, a zôē that can be distinguished and separated from bios” (P 129).

Pulcinella is neither a bios nor a zôē because he incarnates “the third term that appears in their coincidence – that is, in their falling together” (P 129). This third term involves play, for play is what allows us to use our body as a space of pure mediality, a place that we inhabit without mastery. This third term also involves the comic attitude, for
the comic attitude is what allows us to recognize our bodies as free of responsibility and
guilt, as something that needs not be redeemed. Form-of-life is this third term. It is the
falling together of life and form such that life and form becomes inseparable. Pulcinella
displays form-of-life because his life is the sum of his deeds: living itself is what grants
him form. He is an example of living that cannot be reduced to a personality, a character,
or a set of behavioral dispositions. Beyond the division of life into bios and zōē is the
possibility living aesthetically, that is, as a whole that is not the result of a synthesis but the
result of stepping aside towards the origin.

The fact that Pulcinella displays a form-of-life has one notable shortcoming, however, that we must confront. Although Pulcinella shows us how deeds are possible
without juridical imputability, he is merely an invented figure, an artificial amalgamation
of jest and protest with a highly problematic relationship to reality. Pulcinella’s blameless
antics are easy to appreciate in artistic representations, but the moment we imagine a world
where resources are scarce and people have to work together to construct or maintain the
material conditions necessary for life, it becomes clear that a society of Pulcinellas is
simply not possible. Pulcinella does not work, he only plays. He exists in the space that
opens up when work is done, when the narrative of humanity’s striving is disrupted,
abandoned, and rendered inoperative. The reality of the world that we find ourselves in,
however, demands that we work for food, shelter, and clothing, that we struggle for
friendship, love, and respect. Pulcinella represents a utopian form-of-life where there is no
difficulty satisfying our basic needs. He is an idea that cannot be instituted in reality: the
form-of-life that he makes manifest is an idea of pure potential that can never become an actual form of life (without the hyphens).\textsuperscript{42}

What is missing in the idea of Pulcinella is the idea of a \textit{shared} space for living-together, of a \textit{common} use of bodies aimed towards sustaining and maintaining the conditions for life. Can there be a form of life (i.e. a way of living, an \textit{ethos}) that is also a form-of-life (i.e. the coincidence of form and life)? To think of a community that is neither \textit{bios} nor \textit{zōē} requires us to move beyond the figures of Pulcinella and play. What we need to think is a “form-of-life” that is not just an escape route, but a “rule-of-living,” i.e. a coincidence of living and regularized practice that does not involve moral or juridical precepts. The idea is not new: phrases such as \textit{vita vel regula, regula et vita, forma vivendi}, and \textit{forma vitae} have been coined by Franciscan monks in the 12\textsuperscript{th}/13\textsuperscript{th} centuries to express

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{42} Not every Agamben scholar understands the difference between form-of-life and form of life in the same manner. DeCaroli (2016), for instance, characterizes form-of-life as “a \textit{kind} of form of life. It is a life that remains aware of its way of living as a way of living [...] The habit of being aware of the contingency of our cognitive orientation is precisely what distinguishes form-of-life from any other form of life and, of course, necessarily lurks within every form of life because \textit{every} worldview is capable of bearing witness to its own profane construction” (227). My contention with DeCaroli’s reading is that it downplays the tension that inevitably exists between a life that cannot be separated from its form and a life that is characterized by ordinary norms and identities, and it makes form-of-life far too easy for just about anyone to achieve. If form-of-life were just a habitual awareness of the contingency of one’s form of life, then any modern thinking subject would have already obtained this by virtue of self-reflection: all it takes is for one to live an ordinary form of life (say, as a painter or a professor) while being aware that this identity is constructed (and can therefore be deconstructed). As I understand it, however, the whole point of living a form-of-life is that it is a life that cannot be reduced to a set of norms or practical identities: it is a life beyond the metaphysics of empirical and intelligible character. To live a form-of-life is to \textit{live} one’s life such that one cannot say that one is a “painter” or a “professor.” It is not a matter of being \textit{conscious} of the contingency of one’s identity but of rendering inoperative the entire game of having to recognize oneself as such-and-such. This is why Pulcinella plays such an important role in my reading of Agamben. Pulcinella is not merely aware that every way of living is just a way of living – he exists without needing to have a way of life. As parabasis, his life resists all practical identities. But precisely that is why his life is not “actual” in the Aristotelian or Hegelian sense. As parabasis, he is mere play (i.e. pure potential).
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the idea of a communal life that is also a form-of-life, a falling-together of life and rules untouched by the juridical sphere. In the next section, we will examine what Agamben calls “the most precious legacy of Franciscanism […] how to think a form-of-life, a human life entirely removed from the grasp of the law and a use of bodies and of the world that would never be substantiated into an appropriation” (HP xiii). This will take us beyond from the paradigm of the aesthetic human towards that of the aesthetic state.

Chapter 3.3 – Form-of-Life

I. The Highest Poverty

In the previous section, we have seen through the example of Pulcinella how it might be possible to inhabit a life that cannot be separated from its form with the use of one’s body. The problem with Pulcinella is that he is a fictional figure: it is not at all clear – in fact, it is highly doubtful – whether a life of permanent parabasis is possible in the world of actual living. For this reason, the Franciscans are an important counterpoint to Pulcinella: they, too, seek to inhabit a life that cannot be separated from its form; unlike Pulcinella, however, what they emphasize is not the use of one’s body but the use of common things. Whereas Pulcinella exemplifies how the body is inappropriable, i.e. neither reducible to “character” nor “will,” the Franciscans show us how one can make use of things without appropriating them, i.e. turning them into property. In a paradigmatic way, the Franciscans demonstrate how form-of-life might be sharable, for the use of common things is what constitutes their form of life. Yet the question remains: how is it possible for humans to live together in a community without mediation from the law? How is it possible, in other words, to share a
way of living together with other humans without norms and precepts regulating our behaviors and practices? Our task in this section is to examine what Agamben has to say about the Franciscans with an eye towards answering these questions. But the Franciscans are merely a first step; as we shall see, their success in grasping the idea of form-of-life is hampered by their failure to theorize a positive concept of use. Fortunately, in The Use of Bodies, Agamben provides us with a positive concept of use that eluded the Franciscans. By bringing together the idea of a shared form-of-life with Agamben’s positive definition of use, a concept of community begins to emerge that will allow us to come to a better understanding of what Schiller means by the aesthetic state.

But first, let us take a look at the Franciscans. The Order of Friars Minor is founded on the idea that the life of a true Christian is a life that locates itself outside the sphere of the law. The key to understanding how such a life is possible lies in the distinction between form and rule. In the Regula bullata, Francis of Assisi is recorded to have said: “no one showed me what I should do [quid deberem facere], but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live [quod deberem vivere] according to the form of the Holy Gospel” (HP 97). The opposition between quid [what I must do] and quod [that I must live] is not trivial: according to Agamben, what Francis tries to distinguish here is the difference between “the observation of precepts” and “the simple fact of living according to a form” (HP 97). It is on the basis of this distinction that the idea of a shared form-of-life becomes thinkable for the Franciscans: to live with Christ as a model and image of life is not a matter of “applying a form (or norm) to life, but of living according to that form, that is of a life that, in its sequence, makes itself that very form, coincides with it” (HP 99). Instead of
imposing an external rule onto life, in other words, the Franciscans seek to live in such a way that “life is indeterminated into rule” and “rule is indeterminated into life” (HP 100). This indetermination of life and rule, however, is not to be understood as a simple blurring together, for the phrase *regula et vita* that Francis uses to describe the process is ambiguous: on the one hand, life and rule are conjoined into a single unit; on the other, they are separated by the conjunction. Francis, Agamben says, “conjoins and at the same time disjoins the two terms, as if the form of life that he has in mind could be situated only in the space of the *et*, in the reciprocal tension between rule and life” (HP 101). The syntagmas *forma vitae* and *forma vivendi*, which later Franciscans prefer to use instead of *regula et vita*, evoke a similar dynamic: all these formulas designate the same idea, namely, that of a life that is “not a simple way of life, but an exemplary, qualified way of life that cannot […] be understood as a rule” (HP 104). Form is not a rule for the Franciscans because form is not a norm: it is something imminent to life. The idea of *forma vitae* and *forma vivendi* is the idea of a life that, in following the footsteps of Christ, “gives itself and makes itself a form” (HP 105). What is at stake in these formulations is neither life nor rule, but the “neutralization and transformation of both” into a third term (HP 107).

But how can life “give itself and make itself a form”? What operation enables life to do this without the interference of rules, norms, and precepts? The Franciscans had to grapple with these questions because they had to justify their way of life to a church that was suspicious of their doctrine. And the church was right to be suspicious – after all, to live outside the sphere of the law is to reject the authority of civil and ecclesiastical laws alike. An existence that gives itself form is an existence that has shed itself of every duty
and responsibility that constitutes the divine office of the church. The Franciscans, however, justified their way of life by claiming that they are following in the footsteps of Christ. They regard themselves as having taken the vow of the “highest poverty” (*altissimia paupertas*), which they define as “the abdication of every right” (*abdicatio omnis iuris*) (*HP* 110). To abdicate every right is to forgo all claims of ownership and all spheres of responsibility. It is to announce the possibility of “a human life and practice absolutely outside the determinations of the law” (*HP* 110).

For the Franciscans, then, poverty is what makes form-of-life possible. The operation that enables life to give itself and make itself a form is *abdicatio iuris*, i.e. the renunciation of law. But renunciation is a negative concept: it defines itself negatively as the rejection of a law-governed life. *Abdicatio iuris* does not explain what constitutes existence outside the sphere of the law, it merely demarcates what is precluded from juridical existence. To explain what the highest poverty means in positive terms, the Franciscans needed a theory of use. But what is use? The Franciscans came up with many answers, yet they all had a major shortcoming: use was always contrasted with right of ownership. The Franciscans were only able to explain what use is by referring to property; they never quite succeeded in coming up with a positive concept of use, possibly because use for them was something so primal and originary that it seems to need no further elucidation. In order to explain, for example, how it is possible that a Franciscan friar can make use of things despite having rejected all rights of ownership, the Franciscans developed the doctrine of originary communism which asserts that before the fall “all things are everyone’s” (*HP* 112). In the state of innocence, in other words, there is no
property, only use. Use thus precedes property, but what use by itself means remains unclear. William of Ockham (c. 1287-1347) developed the concept by distinguishing natural right of use (ius utendi naturale) from positive right of use (ius utendi positivum). He argues that although Franciscan friars have the natural right of use over things in times of extreme necessity, during periods of normality they are only permitted to use things but have no right to them. In Agamben’s paraphrase: “The Friars Minor […] though having no positive right to the things they use, nevertheless have over them a natural right limited to the case of extreme necessity […] They have renounced all property and every faculty of appropriating, but not the natural right of use, which is, insofar as it is a natural right, unrenounceable” (HP 114-5). Thus use, according to Ockham, is unrenounceable because it lies in the sphere of natural right. The fact that Ockham defines use as a relation to things that we have in the state of necessity is striking here because it essentially means that he presents the Franciscans way of life as being in a permanent state of exception. Viewed in this light, abdicatio iuris is an attempt at reversing the structure of the juridical machine: “What for others is normal […] becomes the exception for [the Franciscans]; what for others is an exception becomes for them a form of life” (HP 115). The juridical paradox that appears so bleak and apocalyptic in the early volumes of the Homo Sacer series is embraced by the Franciscans as a necessary prerequisite for form-of-life. There is an important difference, however, between the state of exception brought about by abdicatio iuris and the state of exception that results from the apparatus of the law: whereas in the latter case, the force of law remains at work in the absence of the law (hence it is a state of unmitigated violence), in the former case, there is no force of law, only use.
Abdicatio iuris, according to Ockham, is analogous to the state of innocence: in the state of exception where there is no force of law, Ockham sees a sphere of life that is originary and unrenounceable, a life that gives itself form rather than a life reduced to bare existence. By thinking of use as a natural right, however, Ockham is still caught within juridical discourse. He never quite succeeded in explaining what use is except as a right, i.e. as a kind of ethical rule. It is a problem that plagues the work of many other Franciscans. Hugh of Digne’s observation that “it is possible always and everywhere to renounce ownership, but to renounce use never and nowhere” \[propietati ubique et semper renunciari potest, usui vero nunquam et nusquam\], does not tell us what use by itself is, only what it is not (HP 124). Similarly, Bonaventure, who argues in Apologia pauperum that humans have four possible relations to temporal things (ownership, possession, usufruct, and simple use), define use (or simple use) by contrasting it to right of ownership: the Friars Minor, he writes, “may have use \[usum habeat\] of equipment or books and such other movable property as it is permitted,” but the ownership of these things belongs to the Church and the pope alone (HP 125). All these attempts at formulating more precise definitions of use are compromised by the fact that they still employ the language of juridical discourse. In such a discourse, the Franciscans have little chance of success. The critical moment came in the year 1322 when pope John XXII’s bull Ad conditorem called into question the possibility of separating ownership and use (HP 129). The pope observes that consumables such as food and drinks can only be used once before they are permanently no longer available for further usage. In such cases, he argues, it makes no sense to separate ius utendi or usus facti from ownership: to consume something is to make
it one’s own, if not by right, then by fact. The pope has a point. After all, an apple that has entered one’s digestive system could hardly be conceived as something inappropriable. Once the idea that use and right of ownership is always separable was put into question, the philosophical presupposition grounding the Franciscans’ way of life was no longer deemed persuasive. For all their subtleties, the Franciscans never quite succeeded in explaining how de facto use and de facto ownership differ. Today, the pope’s objection to the Franciscans has become common sense. “By radically opposing use and consumption,” writes Agamben in a footnote, “John XXII, in an unconscious prophecy, furnishes the paradigm of an impossibility of using that was to find its full realization many centuries later in consumer society” (HP 131). In today’s society, we understand use as consumption, which is to say, we no longer recognize a sphere of use outside the sphere of utility. The rule of the law is total in our society: we recognize only commodities, and commodities are always owned and appropriated through consumption.

To defend themselves against the argument of John XXII, the Franciscans stubbornly maintained that right of ownership and usus facti are in fact separable. Bonagratia of Bergamo (c. 1265-1340), for example, cited the divine command for Adam and Eve to eat only from the trees of paradise as evidence that use is “unrenounceable” and that “according to natural and divine law, what was originally common was not ownership but use” (HP 132). Francis of Ascoli, meanwhile, tried to develop “a true and proper ontology of use” by explaining how being and becoming coincide in use (HP 132). Finally, William of Ockham argues that there is an important difference between right of use and fact of use: “In whatever way usus iuris is taken,” he is quoted as saying, “[…] it is always
a right and not an act of using” (HP 133-4). None of these arguments are effective, for in the end, the Franciscans cannot escape the fact that use is still defined “with purely negative arguments with respect to the law” (HP 137). Moreover, as Agamben points out, “the doctrine of the usus facti represented for the Friars Minor a very fragile shield against the heavy artillery of the Curial jurists” (HP 137). In a way, Francis is more prescient than his successors in refusing to articulate a precise definition for form-of-life (HP 137). By leaving the concept of form-of-life indeterminate, Francis shows us how an existence outside the sphere of the law does not need to justify itself before the law.

Why, though, were the Franciscans unable to come up with a positive definition of use? Although Agamben does not explicitly tell us why the Franciscans could only come up with negative definitions of use, he does say that one of the main problems with their theorization of use is that they think of use as a conscious act of energeia, i.e. as an actualization of the capacity to utilize things. Burdened with the metaphysics of Aristotle, they were not in a position to conceive of use except through the logic of action that was ultimately rooted in a juridical view of human agency. “Instead of confining use on the level of a pure practice, as a fictitious series of acts of renouncing the law,” writes Agamben, “it would have been more fruitful to try to think its relation with the form of life of the Friars Minor, asking how these acts could be constituted […] in a habit” (HP 140). The alternative to thinking about use as a conscious act is to think of it as a function of habit, i.e. as a mode of inhabiting. That means not thinking of use as the consumption or utilization of an object, but as the enactment of a behavioral pattern that constitutes one’s way of life. That use can indeed be conceived positively as a function of habit is argued in
The Use of Bodies, a work that we will now turn to, for it is here that Agamben gives us his most developed account of form-of-life.

II. Contemplation, Habit, and Use

“With the term form-of-life,” writes Agamben in The Use of Bodies, “[…] we understand a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate and keep distinct something like a bare life” (UB 207). Such a life, he continues, can never become actual or instituted as a concrete way of living, for it is a life in which “singular modes, acts, and processes of living are never simply facts but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all potential” (UB 207). To inhabit a form-of-life, in other words, is not to lead a particular way of life, but to experience life itself as a potential, i.e. as that which is open to new possible uses. In chapter 3.2, we have seen how play enables us to have this experience. Play, however, is in some ways a problematic term, for we are used to thinking of play as a transitory process rather than as a relationship that the self has towards the body and the world. In The Use of Bodies, Agamben prefers to speak of contemplation rather than play. The book’s last sentence quotes Spinoza’s remark that the greatest good that a human can hope for is the joy born when human beings “contemplate themselves and their own potential for acting” (ÜB 278). “Form-of-life, the properly human life,” Agamben writes,

is the one that, by rendering inoperative the specific works and functions of the living being, causes them to idle, so to speak, and in this way opens them into possibility. Contemplation and inoperativity are in this sense the
metaphysical operators of anthropogenesis, which, in liberating human beings from every biological and social destiny and every predetermined task, render them available for that peculiar absence of work that we are accustomed to calling ‘politics’ and ‘art.’ Politics and art are not tasks or simply ‘works’: rather, they name the dimension in which works – linguistic and bodily, material and immaterial, biological and social – are deactivated and contemplated as such in order to liberate the inoperativity that has remained imprisoned in them. (UB 277-8)

Why does Agamben use the word “contemplation” rather than “play” to describe the liberation of humans from “every predetermined task”? Prima facie, “contemplation” is just as misleading as “play” since it, too, is often thought of as a momentary activity. Moreover, when we think of contemplation as a form of life, we tend to think of the secluded life of philosophers in their ivory towers. The fact that Agamben occasionally describes form-of-life as being “in perpetual flight” and as tending “to separate itself ascetically into an autonomous sphere” seems to confirm this suspicion (UB 232). Yet must all form-of-life be a flight from actuality? Is it not possible to imagine a “life that can never be separated from its form” that is at the same time a concrete way of living together with other humans outside the sphere of law? Elsewhere in his oeuvre, both within and outside of the Homo Sacer series, Agamben cites examples of form-of-life that appear at first glance to be non-contemplative. Pulcinella, for instance, leads a life of permanent parabasis and constant plot-disruption: he appears to have found a way of neutralizing the juridical apparatus without having to “contemplate” his potential for acting. In The Use of Bodies,
Agamben also cites the example of Helen Grund Hessel, whose published diary describes an existence that is “never exhausted in a series of deeds and episodes” (UB 191). “The life that Helen lives and the life through which she lives are identified without remainder,” says Agamben, “and what appears in this coincidence is no longer a presupposed life but something that, in life, ceaselessly surpasses and overtakes it: a form-of-life” (UB 191). Yet Helen Grund Hessel does not lead what we would normally call a contemplative life. Why then does Agamben emphasize contemplation in the epilogue of The Use of Bodies?

The reason contemplation plays such an important role in The Use of Bodies has to do with the way the term is defined by Agamben. Contemplation for Agamben is not a mental act or a state of consciousness. Contemplation according to Agamben is “the paradigm of use” (UB 63). “Like use,” he says, “contemplation does not have a subject, because in it the contemplator is completely lost and dissolved; like use, contemplation does not have an object, because in the work it contemplates only its (own) potential” (UB 63). In contemplation, in other words, there is neither a contemplating subject nor an object of contemplation. To contemplate is to suspend the subject/object scission: “Life, which contemplates in the work its (own) potential of acting and making, is rendered inoperative in all its works and lives only in use-of-itself, lives only (its) livability,” writes Agamben (UB 63). Contemplation makes the use-of-oneself possible because it is what renders life inoperative, thus freeing it for use.

Agamben’s definition of contemplation here can be compared to what we have called “the aesthetic condition” in the previous section. Like the aesthetic condition, contemplation is a mode of experience where the active and the passive, subject and object,
master and mastered, etc. are suspended so as to open up a space for new distributions of
sense. “Deactivation,” the process whereby a work is rendered inoperative and liberated of
its telos, is Agamben’s way of expressing what Rancière calls “disidentification.” There is
a crucial difference, however, between these two concepts: whereas aesthetic experience
for Rancière is an exercise of logos (i.e. our capacity to use language to reframe a certain
partitioning of sense), contemplation for Agamben is a not the exercise of a capacity for
logos, but a mode of inhabiting. Contemplation, Agamben tells us, is “habitual use” (UB
63), and use is “the form in which habit is given existence” (UB 60). Thus to understand
what contemplation means, we need to grasp how use and habit are inseparably
intertwined. This is not an easy task, for it will require us to overturn some of the most
deep-rooted beliefs of Western metaphysics.

Normally, when we think of use, we think of it as having efficacy. To use something
is to make something happen: it is an act because something is activated in the process.
Use, according to this definition, brings about the state of energeia (“being-at-work”) in
things. It is an operation where there is necessarily an active subject (the agent activating
something) and a passive object (the patient being put to use). But all this, Agamben says,
is modern prejudice. The ancient Greek word for “to use” (chresthai) was different: it
did not have an accusative object because “the process does not pass from an active subject
toward the object separate from his action” (UB 28). The verb chresthai according to
Agamben “expresses the relation that one has with oneself, the affection that one receives
insofar as one is in relation with a determinate being” (UB 28). The phrase somatos
chresthai (“to use the body”), for example, refers to “the affection that one receives insofar
as one is in relation with one or more bodies” (UB 29). The body here is not an object that the subject puts to use: rather, what is in question is the constitution of the subject as the affection of being-related-to-the-body. Defined this way, use is always a matter of the self reflexively relating to itself through its relation to things. Agamben’s way of putting it is thus:

[…] use is first of all use of self: to enter into a relation of use with something, I must be affected by it, constitute myself as one who makes use of it. Human being and world are, in use, in a relationship of absolute and reciprocal immanence; in the using of something, it is the very being of the one using that is first of all at stake. (UB 30)

In use, then, there is neither a subject nor an object; the affection that the agent receives from her action and the affection that the patient receives from her passion correspond so that subject and object are “deactivated and rendered inoperative” (UB 30). The peculiar logic at work here is similar to how Foucault conceives of sadomasochism. Just as in sadomasochism “the one whose body is (or seems to be) used is actually constituted to the same extent as [the] subject of its being used,” so it is with use in general (UB 35). When I use my pen to write, for example, I am also at the same time being used by my pen to constitute myself as someone writing with a pen. Neither the pen nor I, however, are at work. Use is not work. It is the experience of the self of itself through its relation to other things.
Use for Agamben then is inseparably intertwined with habit. To illustrate how habit and use are interconnected, Agamben invites us to reflect on the eccentric pianist, Glenn Gould:

Glenn Gould, to whom we attribute the habit of playing the piano, does nothing but make use-of-himself insofar as he plays and knows habitually how to play the piano. He is not the title holder and master of the potential to play, which he can put to work or not, but constitutes-himself as having use of the piano, independently of his playing it or not playing it in actuality.

*Use, as habit, is a form-of-life and not the knowledge or faculty of a subject.*

*(UB 62)*

Use here is the bringing-forth of a habit, a process of self-constitution. Thinking about use this way means thinking of human beings not as agents with the potential to act or make something happen, but as beings who constitute themselves through its relations to things. Glenn Gould is neither a master of himself nor a person possessing the ability to play the piano: he is merely a being who constitutes himself through the habit of piano-playing. Similarly, “the poet, the carpenter, the cobbler […] and, in the end, every human being [are] not transcendent title holders of a capacity to act or make: rather, they are living beings that, in the use and only in the use of their body parts as of the world that surrounds them, have self-experience and constitute-themselves as using (themselves and the world)” *(UB 62).*

The fact that using something is not to be understood as an act that produces work does not mean that work is absent in Agamben’s thought. Rather than thinking of work as
the result of a potential or habit that we possess, Agamben wants us to think of work as the site where habit is “in use”:

The work is not the result or achievement of a potential, which is realized and consumed in it: the work is that in which potential and habit are still present, still in use; it is the dwelling of habit, which does not stop appearing and, as it were, dancing in it, ceaselessly opening it to a new possible use.

(UB 62)

By defining work as the dwelling of habit, Agamben effectively neutralizes the actual/potential binary that pictures actuality as an externalization of potential. Work for Agamben is not the site where habit, as hidden potential, consummates itself in expression. On the contrary, as the site where habit is in use, the potential never reaches consummation – it is always “dancing.” Perhaps another word that we can use to describe habitual use here is “play.” In use, the self is constituted as an affection of the self through its relation to other things. In habitual use, it is the same except that the relation is now repeated over an extended period of time. Now, since contemplation is habitual use, and since habitual use is defined by Agamben not as a capacity to know or act but as a mode of self-experience and self-constitution through the repeated relating of oneself to things, it is clear that contemplation cannot be a conscious experience. As habitual use, contemplation is non-conscious dwelling. “Every use is the articulation of a zone of non-consciousness,” writes Agamben (UB 64), and this zone of non-consciousness, he says, “is not something like a mystical fog in which the subject loses itself but the habitual dwelling in which the living being, before every subjectivation, is perfectly at ease” (HB 63-4). Far from being a
conscious experience, then, contemplation for Agamben is the experience of a zone of non-consciousness where every living being is “perfectly at ease” with its being in the world. Pulcinella and Helen Grund Hessel, although they do not lead what we would normally call contemplative lives, are exemplary cases of contemplation because their lives are articulations of this zone of ease and non-consciousness. They contemplate their potential for acting, not by consciously thinking about it, but by experiencing life as habitual use.

What about community though? It is strange that whenever Agamben tries to elucidate the idea of form-of-life, he usually only gives us examples of individual lives. Pulcinella and Helen Grund Hessel are individuals: they exemplify the use of oneself as a use of the body rather than as the use of common things. But why does Agamben not talk about communal forms-of-life in *The Use of Bodies*? It is as if, after having hinted so much at the possibility of a post-juridical humanity in works such as *The Coming Community* and *The Highest Poverty*, Agamben has decided that form-of-life is something only a few exemplary individuals are able to achieve. Yet, if form-of-life is contemplation, and if contemplation is habitual use, is it not also true that habitual use could be shared with others and therefore a possible condition for a shared form of living? Instead of thinking of Glenn Gould, we might think of an orchestra musician. Like Glenn Gould, the orchestra musician is someone who constitutes herself through the habit of music-making (and all the relations involved in this habit), but unlike Glenn Gould, this habit of music-making is necessarily shared with others (for to make music in an orchestra is to make music with other orchestra musicians; what is at stake here is the habit of making-music-with-others). Can we not imagine a community of humans whose use of body manifests itself in a habit that involves
other bodies being put in similar use? One might think of chess-playing as another such example: the chess-player who constitutes herself through the habit of playing-chess-with-others is only able to enact this habit with the help of other chess.players who also constitute themselves through the habit of playing-chess-with-others. A community of such chess.players is dependent on one another for habitually using themselves. Can we not extend these examples onto the level of life?

Technically, neither a community of orchestra musicians nor a community of chess players would constitute form-of-life, for such communities are defined by their identities and the corresponding norms. What counts as a successful actualization of a music-playing or a chess-playing community is not arbitrary: there are conceptual rules governing what constitutes music-making or chess-playing (in the case of chess-playing, the rules are predetermined; in the case of music-making, the rules are a bit more open and can be renegotiated, but a certain level of agreement is still needed to differentiate the act of making-music from other activities). For form-of-life and a form of life to coincide, however, we must be able to imagine a community without norms or identity. If form-of-life is a life that gives itself form without any specification of character, then a shared form-of-life must also give itself form without any specific conditions of belonging together. Is such a thing possible? Can there be a community that is pure potential, a community with neither norms nor ends?

At this juncture, we are approaching the threshold of Agamben’s thought. In the Homo Sacer series, Agamben only succeeds in articulating a positive concept of form-of-life that is non-communal. The Franciscans may not have succeeded in formulating a
positive concept of form-of-life, but they succeeded in articulating the idea of a life outside
the sphere of law that is communal because it is constituted by the shared use of things. If
we put the two and two together, i.e. if we recast Agamben’s definition of form-of-life as
habitual use into the context of communal living, we will approach an area of thought that
Agamben frequently hints at but never fully explicates, namely, the idea of a community
defined neither by identities nor any condition of belonging together, but only by the
relation of belonging-together. Our task now is to investigate whether such a community
is realizable as a lasting state of affairs in the world.

III. The Coming Community
As anyone with even the most basic knowledge of German knows, the noun Spiel could be
translated into English either as “play” or as “game.” To translate it as “play” is to
emphasize the activity of playing, i.e. the interaction between the subject and object of play.
To translate it as “game,” by contrast, is to emphasize Spiel as a practice, i.e. a shared
custom or institution. If we keep the latter translation in mind when we read the Ästhetische
Briefe, then Schiller’s claim that “der Mensch […] ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt”
begins to take on a new light. What if “spielen” here does not designate the activity of an
individual but the participation of individuals within a shared practice? Perhaps the
aesthetic human is not the human who plays as an individual but the human who constitutes
herself by participating with other humans in the shared activity of playing-together.
Schiller himself does not pursue this line of thought in Letter XV of the Ästhetische Briefe,
but his descriptions of various examples of Spiel in Letter XXVII (the aestheticization of
tools, the ornamentalization of clothing, the practice of turning physical movements and verbal utterances into a source of pleasure) suggest that whenever Schiller thinks of play, the idea of community is never far from his mind.

Let us suppose for a moment that a shared form-of-life is possible, that a community of aesthetic humans is not a complete impossibility. What sort of conditions must be fulfilled for such a community to exist? A community of aesthetic humans is a community that plays, and a community that plays is a community that gives itself form without the imposition of external precepts. Such a community cannot have fixed identities, for fixed identities (such as “chess-players”) have norms characterizing their conditions of success. (If a putative chess player moves her rook diagonally, she is not playing chess – she fails at being a chess-player.) On the other hand, an aesthetic community is not merely a “negative community” in the sense that Blanchot describes, for what is at stake is the idea of a community that exists in reality as a form of life.\(^{43}\) Agamben has a name for this idea of a community that gives itself form without the need for identity: he calls it a community of “whatever singularity.” Such a community, Agamben says, is always opposed to the state, not because the social is opposed to the state, but because that which resists identification (i.e. whatever singularity) can never be actualized or integrated into state-recognized practices. As Agamben puts it:

> Whatever singularities cannot form a *societas* because they do not possess any identity to vindicate nor any bond of belonging for which to seek

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\(^{43}\) The first essay of Blanchot’s *Unavowable Community* (1988) argues for a notion of community that is irreducibly non-present and non-self-identical. A community of aesthetic humans, on the other hand, must exist in a presence of some kind, otherwise it would not be a form of life.
recognition. In the final instance the State can recognize any claim for identity […] What the State cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging […] (CC 86)

Agamben’s coming community is thus not the idea of a utopian community that is yet to come in some deferred future. Rather, it is the idea of a humanity that exists as whatever singularity, i.e. a humanity that shows itself to be inappropriable and irreducible to a set of identities and instituted practices. The Franciscans came close to realizing this idea of humanity when they renounced all rights (both positive and natural) to embrace the use of common things as their way of life. They lost their way once they became embroiled in juridical discourse and became another institution of the church, yet their initial success suggests that resistance to the juridical sphere of life is possible, that form-of-life can be shared among a group of humans as a way of living that is material and real.

Yet this vague sense of hope is all that Agamben leaves us with. Agamben never tells us whether he thinks a community of whatever singularity is something that we can bring about as a lasting state of affairs in the world or whether it is something that we must continually perform through temporary acts of resistance. In The Coming Community, the only example of communal whatever singularity that Agamben cites are the Tiananmen Square demonstrations of 1989. What is striking about these protests, he says, is their lack of determinate demands (“democracy and freedom are notions too generic and broadly defined to constitute the real object of a conflict, and the only concrete demand, the rehabilitation of Hu Yao-Bang, was immediately granted,” he adds) (85). Other historical
examples of anti-state demonstrations without determinate identities (the list is endless: the solidarity movements in 1980s Poland, the occupy wall street movement in 2011, the Gilets jaunes movement in 2018/19, etc.) might also count as examples of human communities expressing themselves as whatever singularity. Whenever humans come together as a crowd without any specific condition of belonging, they are in effect forming a community of whatever singularity. Because crowds are ephemeral and quickly dispersed, however, they do not exemplify the idea of a shared form-of-life that the Franciscans sought to bring about. In Agamben’s texts, concrete examples of a long-lasting shared form-of-life are simply non-existent. Even the Franciscans seem to have succeeded in living a shared form-of-life only through *abdicatio iuris*, which was in the end a temporary act of resistance against the sphere of law of their times. Although Agamben often speaks of the possibility of humanity existing outside the sphere of the law, the idea is never concretized into something that we can imagine as persisting in a real-world setting, as something that we can bring about in the world that we live in.

But perhaps that is the point. The point of theorizing about form-of-life is not to change the material conditions that we find ourselves in or to spur us towards concrete political action. The point is to enable ourselves to experience the self (via contemplation) as pure potential (as proper humans). In fact, the idea that *action* is needed to change the material conditions of the world is an old way of thinking about politics. Agamben wants to replace that sort of politics with something different. As he reminds us in the epilogue of the *Homo Sacer* series:
The archeology of politics that was in question in the ‘Homo Sacer’ project did not propose to critique or correct this or that concept, this or that institution of Western politics. The issue was rather to call into question the place and the very originary structure of politics, in order to try to bring to light the *arcanum imperii* that in some way constituted its foundation and that had remained at the same time fully exposed and tenaciously hidden in it. (*UB* 263)

A few pages later, he continues,

In modern thought, radical political changes have been thought by means of the concept of ‘constituent power.’ Every constituted power presupposed at its origin a constituent power that, through a process that as a rule has the form of a revolution, brings it into being and guarantees it. If our hypothesis on the structure of the *archè* is correct, if the fundamental ontological problem today is not work but inoperativity, and if this latter can nevertheless be attested only with respect to a work, then access to a different figure of politics cannot take the form of a ‘constituent power’ but rather that of something that we can provisionally call ‘destituent potential.’

(*UB* 266)

The new politics that Agamben is interested in, in other words, is not a politics of action that seeks to change or affect the way society and forms of life are organized. Rather than continue the violent cycle of reconstituting new power structures, the politics that Agamben is interested in (the politics of “destituent potential”) is a “politics set free from every figure
of relation” (UB 268). Agamben cites the Pauline letters as an example of “a destituent strategy that is neither destructive nor constituent” (UB 273). In conceiving of the messiah as a force that will “render inoperative every power, every authority, and every potential,” while calling it at the same time “the telos of the law,” Paul makes inoperativity and fulfillment coincide in the figure of the messiah (UB 273). The messiah here does not destroy the law; the law is merely rendered inoperative and turned into a source of pure potential. This messianic operation of rendering things inoperative (without destroying them) is what makes use possible. “A form-of-life is, in this sense, that which ceaselessly deposes the social conditions in which it finds itself to live, without negating them, but simply by using them,” writes Agamben (UB 274). The new figure of politics that Agamben speaks of is thus a politics of use where “destitution coincides without remainder with constitution” (UB 275). The point is not to bring about change through action. The point is to experience our use of the world in a new light, so that the world is no longer a source of authority but a source of play, not a place where work is done but the ground where potential is made manifest. This is why Agamben invites us to reflect on a parable that Walter Benjamin told Ernst Bloch in The Coming Community:

The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different. (CC 53)
The difference that separates the catastrophic world that we live in from the redeemed world that is to come does not consist of a change in the state of things. The tiny displacement between the two worlds “does not take place in things, but at their periphery, in the space of ease between everything and itself” (CC 54). To achieve this tiny displacement, what is needed is contemplation, not action. Therein lies both the novelty and the limit of Agamben’s political thought. To him, the struggle for recognitive and redistributive justice that characterizes much of modern politics is merely another case of the juridical-biopolitical-socioeconomic machine extending its administrative power over life. Viewed from a certain perspective, however, Agamben’s new figure of politics is ultimately an attempt to escape from the need to struggle for justice in the world of actuality. He does not replace Aristotle’s model of human action with a new figure of human agency. Instead, by rendering the entire edifice of Western metaphysics inoperative, he points us towards a new figure of politics that valorizes inaction.

“Until a completely new politics – that is a politics no longer founded on the exceptio of bare life – is at hand,” writes Agamben in the first volume of the Homo Sacer series, “every theory and every praxis will remain imprisoned and immobile, and the ‘beautiful day’ of life will be given citizenship only either through blood and death or in the perfect senselessness to which the society of the spectacle condemns it” (11). Twenty years after those words were first put in print, it is now clear what this “new politics” amounts to. It is the politics of Pulcinella, a politics of escape through parabasis. The Homo Sacer series, which Agamben says cannot be completed, merely abandoned, reveals to us no solution and no guide to the injustices of today’s society. It merely points us towards an
escape route, an escape route that was always there and always accessible through contemplation. Agamben’s “new politics” of destituent potential is neither as “new” nor as “political” as advertised. The contemplation of human potential is the greatest good according to Spinoza. Agamben, in a roundabout way, leads us to the same point.

Is this not a failure of destituent potential? Has Agamben’s philosophy not inadvertently led us to a political dead-end? In *Catastrophe and Redemption* (2013), Jessica Whyte criticizes Agamben for paying insufficient attention to the logic of late capitalism. In many of his work, Agamben simply assumes that the “society of the spectacle” has already dissolved all fixed social relations and identities to produce “a single planetary petty bourgeoisie” (*CC* 63). This dissolution of identities is both catastrophic and redemptive: catastrophic because it annihilates all meaning, thus turning humanity into a being without essence; redemptive because it enables whatever singularity to emerge, for in hollowing out substantive identities, it opens humanity up to a new possible use. Whyte points out, however, that Agamben is “inattentive to the extent to which commodification not only challenges identity by eroding its naturalistic ontological foundations, leaving its empty forms ‘in force without significance,’ but also produces new identities, whether in the form of politicized identity claims that seek to contest the differential distribution of power under capitalism, reactionary responses to the erosion of previous regimes of hierarchical power, or niche markets generated by the production of new desires and identifications” (*Catastrophe and Redemption* 155). Late capitalist society, in other words, does not only dissolve identities but also creates new ones. If we do not take collective action to resist capitalism’s tendency to force humans into fixed identities (whether by
putting them in a position of extreme impoverished material conditions, intolerable cultural alienation, or other conditions of injustice), the majority of the human species will not be in a position to render anything inoperative. Unlike Pulcinella, most people do not have access to an escape route: the plot for them is fixed and will remain so unless politics intervene. The workers in Bangladeshi sweatshops must work in order to survive – there is no parabasis for them, only the unavoidable necessity of making ends meet.

To make inoperativity become possible for the majority of the population, it is not enough that we use our intellect to suspend binaries by exposing the anarchy lying at the center of our ontological categories. Political action is needed to transform society. Agamben’s failure to acknowledge this is a major weakness of his theory. As Whyte aptly puts it:

At its best, Agamben’s thought allows us to think a form of politics that would withdraw from the vacuous shells of established political forms and experiment with new forms of political praxis in the present. At its worst, he depicts the dangers of the present as themselves cause for hope and gives redemptive significance to the expropriative power of capital, leaving him unable to adequately think a rupture with its logic. At its best, his political thought follows Benjamin in seeing our time as shot through with ‘revolutionary chances’ to redeem the hopes of those whose struggles were defeated in the past. At its worst, he portrays the present as a time in which all praxis is ‘imprisoned and immobile,’ and we can do little but place our
hope in the intensification of the dangers of the present. (*Catastrophe and Redemption* 14)

What is missing in Agamben’s philosophical project is the acknowledgement that Pulcinella’s escape route is not a given for a large part of society. Destituent potential is an achievement that only a certain class of individuals are able to access, namely, the petit bourgeois class of late (or spectacular) capitalism. “While [Agamben’s] thought enables us to challenge the social relations derived from rampant consumerism,” observes Whyte, “he offers little to those whose problem is not that they are constantly seduced to consume useless items but that they do not have enough to eat” (*Catastrophe and Redemption* 156). Play and profanation “may provide possibilities for resisting certain aspects of spectacular capitalism […] [but] it is not clear that these strategies are adequate to contesting poverty or labor exploitation, or indeed the concentration camp” (Ibid). To rescue Agamben’s philosophy from leading us down the path of political inaction, we need to start asking questions about how best to transform our society so that the coming community as an ontological category is not only accessible to a few. Unless we change the way society is organized, the *arcanum imperii* that Agamben wishes to bring to light will remain hidden to most. Destituent potential alone is insufficient for ending the cycle of violence brought about by constituent and constituted powers. What is needed is the will to change how power is currently constituted so that destituent potential can become a way of life for all. Pulcinella may succeed in freeing himself from the plot, but he does not try to end the plot for the other figures onstage. If we wish to transform society into a community of destituent potential, we will need a figure other than Pulcinella.
At this point, there are two ways forward. The first is the path of revolutionary violence. In *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, Benjamin asserts that all violence, as means to an end, is either law-constituting or law-preserving (“Alle Gewalt ist als Mittel entweder rechtsetzend oder rechtserhaltend”) (190). These two kinds of violence correspond roughly to what Agamben calls “constituent” and “constituted” powers. But the third figure that Benjamin introduces as the power with the potential to end the cycle of law-constituting and law-preserving violence is slightly different from Agamben’s destituent potential. Benjamin calls it divine violence (“göttliche Gewalt”) (199). Like destituent potential, divine violence is not a means to an end but a means without end. Unlike destituent potential, however, divine violence is defined as law-destroying (“rechtsvernichtend”) (199). That means, it does not merely suspend or render the law inoperative so as to open it up to new possible uses: divine violence *destroys* the law and leaves nothing behind except life. Benjamin compares it to a proletariat general strike that is guided by no specific demands. The point of a proletariat general strike is not to momentarily disrupt society the way Pulcinella disrupts the plot of a commedia dell’arte performance. The sole task of the proletariat general strike is the destruction of state power (“Vernichtung der Staatsgewalt”) (194). By destroying state power, what is left is life itself – not bare life, but life that gives itself form, form-of-life. Action here is not abandoned in favor of contemplation or habitual use; action here coincides without remainder with non-action, for the destruction of the state is what erases the telos of the deed.44 Unlike Agamben, Benjamin sees organized

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44 William Watkin (2015) does a great job explaining how Benjamin’s notion of pure or divine violence differs from Agamben’s: “Benjaminian pure violence does violence to violence. It is [...] the possibility of acting violently towards the oppositional structure of legally sanctioned state violence [...] Agambenian pure violence does not in actual fact do violence to violence [...] Instead,
(non)-action as necessary for redeeming humanity. He is not just interested in bringing the *arcanum imperii* to light through art and philosophical texts; he understands that (non)-action is needed to bring about change, that the revolution must enacted through deeds, not use, habits, or the contemplative experience of life.\footnote{For an alternative reading of *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, one where divine violence is understood to be less of a law-destroying and more of a sense-disruptive operation, see Hamacher’s influential essay “Affirmativ, Strike: Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, edited by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, Routledge, 1994, pp. 110-138.}

The second way forward is the path of gradual modification. Rather than seek to destroy the state once and for all in order to liberate humanity as a community of whatever singularity, the state here is accepted as a necessary evil that must be slowly transformed (through social and political struggles) into a community of humans. Instead of drawing a fixed line separating the state from humanity proper (as Agamben does in *The Coming Community*), the state here is viewed as a malleable institution that can be gradually altered into that which it currently opposes, namely, humanity. This is essentially Schiller’s position in the *Ästhetische Briefe*. The term “aesthetic state” (“ästhetischer Staat”) is the name that Schiller uses to announce the possibility of suspending the binary of law and bare life, not by destroying the state, but by turning it into a new entity, into the ground on which life gives itself form without being governed by laws external to itself. To complete our investigation of aesthetic humanism, we need to examine this concept of the aesthetic state. What is at stake is a new figure of politics that opposes state violence not with violence, but with the suspension of violence in all parts of society through *education*. A
community of aesthetic humans is only possible if everyone has the potential of becoming Pulcinella. And for that to happen, every member of society must be cultivated into a life where parabasis is always possible.

Chapter 3.4 – The Aesthetic State

What is the aesthetic state? In some ways, this is the most crucial question of Schiller’s entire philosophical project. The concept of the aesthetic state is introduced at the very end of the Ästhetische Briefe, in the last few pages of Letter XXVII, as more or less as the culmination of Schiller’s thought. Despite its prominent place in the Ästhetische Briefe, scholars have not paid sufficient attention to the concept. They are generally content with the surface definition, which states that the aesthetic state is a reconciliation of the dynamic state (the state qua force) with the ethical state (the state qua law). The reconciliation of force and law is often interpreted uncharitably as a totalizing figure or as a mystifying ideal. Some even compares it to the aestheticization of politics that one sees in twentieth-century fascist regimes. But is that really what Schiller has in mind? Before we jump to any premature conclusions about the aesthetic state, we ought to first take a look at what Schiller actually wrote. As we shall see, the concept of the aesthetic state is more elusive than it at first appears.

In the dynamic state, Schiller says, humans engage one another as force (“Kraft”) and delimit one another’s effects (“Wirken”); in the ethical state, on the other hand, humans engage one another in accord with the moral law (“Gesetz”) and delimit one another’s will (“Wollen”) (TS 673). But in the aesthetic state, Schiller continues, humans will appear
before one another as form (“nur als Gestalt erscheinen”), they will only confront one another as objects of free play (“nur als Objekt des freien Spiels gegenüber stehen”) (Ibid.). If we use Agamben’s vocabulary, we might recast the three states in the following manner: in the dynamic state, human beings are reduced to bare life; in the ethical state, human beings are reduced to legal persons and/or moral agents; in the aesthetic state, human beings will confront one another as humans proper, i.e. as pure potential, as that which is without essence and therefore open to play. The denizens of the aesthetic state are free, in other words, not because they have a totalized human agency (with sensuous desires conforming to the command of the moral will); on the contrary, they are free because they are not agents at all – they appear to one another as pure form (“Gestalt”). Following Agamben, one might say they face one another as whatever singularity; without the imposition of character or identity (whether empirical or intellectual), the human is liberated from the binary opposition between the individual and the species, between desires that only pertain to one individual and rational norms that pertain all rational beings. Thus Schiller says of the aesthetic state: “Hier darf weder das Einzelne mit dem Ganzen noch das Ganze mit dem Einzelnen streiten. Nicht, weil das eine nachgibt, darf das andre mächtig sein; hier darf es nur Sieger, aber keinen Besiegten geben” (TS 674). Neither sense nor reason has to yield to the other because both are deactivated and thereby sublated into a third-term, namely, play.46

46 Schiller, of course, sometimes speaks of a harmony or coming together of sense and reason, for example when he says “nur die schöne Vorstellung macht ein Ganzes aus [dem Menschen], weil seine beiden Naturen dazu stimmen müssen” (Letter XXVII, TS 674). One must be careful to read such lines while keeping in mind Schiller’s insistence that “der Abstand zwischen Materie und Form, zwischen Leiden und Tätigkeit, zwischen Empfinden und Denken unendlich ist” (Letter XVIII, TS 622). There is no simple coming together of sense and reason in the aesthetic condition,
The fact that the aesthetic state is described by Schiller as a quasi-utopian space where humans confront one another as beautiful forms might suggest that it is merely an ideal that we strive after but never truly reach, similar to Plato’s ideal republic. Yet this cannot be the case, for Schiller clearly states that the aesthetic state is the only way for society to become “actual” (wirklich). Whereas in the dynamic state society is merely “possible” (möglicl) because it is a contingent state of affairs, and whereas in the ethical state it is merely “necessary” (notwendig) because it is just a normative demand of reason, the aesthetic state alone creates a society that is actual because the will of the whole completes itself here in the will of the individual (“der ästhetische Staat allein kann [die Gesellschaft] wirklich machen, weil er den Willen des Ganzen durch die Natur des Individuums vollzieht”) (TS 674). Society becomes actual, in other words, when norms express itself in facts. This definition of the actual as encompassing both facticity and normativity is strikingly and unmistakably Hegelian, yet Schiller is in a way also making an anti-Hegelian claim, for the suggestion here is that society has not yet become actual, that we are still unable to reconcile facticity and normativity. Far from being opposed to the actual, the aesthetic state is the completion of society’s actualization process. Schiller’s claim that society is actual if and only if the will of the whole (i.e. the norms of reason) completes itself in the will of the individual (i.e. the fact of desire), however, needs unpacking. Again, one must resist the temptation here to interpret Schiller as saying that our desires must conform to reason (that would lead to the barbaric condition of reason

there is only the deactivation of the binary opposition through play. (The verb “stimmen” here is a somewhat misleading term, for the “Stimmung” of the two natures is only achieved when both are rendered inoperative.)
dominating the senses). For reason to complete itself in the desires of individuals, it must negate itself as reason to become a third figure that is neither mere reason nor mere desire. Hegel would call this third figure “spirit” (Geist), but Schiller uses the term “beauty” (Schönheit). Beauty in this context signifies the actualization of reason in society. It describes a state where there is no separation of facts and norms, that is, where reason appears as a norm that is imminent in the state of affairs itself.

On the one hand, then, the aesthetic state is a community of humans who appear to one another as pure potential. On the other hand, the aesthetic state is the only form of society that is actual, for here alone reason manifests itself in empirical reality and is not merely a property of the transcendental subject. But how does reason actualize itself? What sort of institutions are needed for this? Schiller provides us with no clear answers to these questions, but he does give us clues. Schiller believes that the key to the actualization of reason lies in education. Taste, according to Schiller, brings harmony to society because it generates “harmony” in the individual (TS 674). We have already seen how this “harmony” makes itself manifest in the individual: it shows itself as inoperativity, as the deactivation of the binary oppositions between the human and the animal, bare life and law, facts and norms, etc. The aesthetic human exists as a form-of-life because it exists as whatever singularity, that is, as that which has no identity and yet gives itself form. If everyone is educated into this “harmonious” existence, then society would become a community without any fixed identity, a community of aesthetic humans. Through the educative transformation of individuals, then, something like an aesthetic state could gradually come into being. Reason for Schiller is essentially freedom, and freedom is achieved if and only
if humans are fully humans, if reason becomes embodied in the human who plays. Once
society is no longer consisted of thinking subjects (who recognize themselves as thinking
subjects) and is instead consisted of aesthetic humans (who recognize themselves as pure
potential), freedom will be achieved and reason will become actualized. But how do we
transform the self-divided thinking subject into an aesthetic human? Surely, visiting state
theaters and art museums is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for form-of-life.
So what does an aesthetic education consist of?

The best answer that Schiller has to this question is found in a letter that he wrote
to the duke of Augustenburg in November 11, 1793. According to Schiller, there are two
major obstacles preventing society from becoming what it should be. The first has to do
with the fact that modern society is a labor-based society, i.e. a society where the majority
of the population must work to fulfill their physical needs to the point of exhaustion (“Der
zahlreichere Teil der Menschen wird durch den harten Kampf mit dem physischen
Bedürfnis viel zu sehr ermüdet und abgespannt, als daß er sich zu einem neuen und innern
Kampf mit Wahnbegriffen und Vorurteile aufraffen sollte”) (TS 512). In such a condition,
Schiller says, a person is unable to think freely and will naturally seek to rest their mind
and body when their work is done (“Das ganze Maß seiner Kraft erschöpft die Sorge für
das Notwendige, und hat er dieses mühsam errungen, so ist Ruhe und nicht neue
Geistesarbeit sein Bedürfnis”) (TS 512). If a person starts to think under this condition of
exhaustion, they are unlikely going to think for themselves and are much more likely going
be seduced by the prefabricated belief systems that the church and the state readily gives
(“Geschieht es, daß in seinem Kopf und Herzen sich höhere Bedürfnisse regen, so ergreift
er mit hungrigem Glauben die Formeln, welche der Staat und das Priestertum für diesen Fall in Bereitschaft halten, und womit es ihnen von jeher gelungen ist, das erwachte Freiheitsgefühl ihrer Mündel abzufinden“) (TS 512). Schiller’s idea here is simple but it plays a crucial role in shaping his political thought: people are not free if they must labor under the condition of necessity. If they must work for their material survival, their deeds will be something that they must do and not something that they do out of play (“Erst muß der Geist vom Joch der Notwendigkeit losgespannt werden, ehe man ihn zur Vernunftfreiheit führen kann,” he writes) (TS 512). From this, it follows that for there to be an aesthetic state, every human must be liberated from the condition of physical necessity that the market economy imposes on the population. Although Schiller has only a superficial grasp of capitalist society (capitalism was still in its infancy at the time that the Ästhetische Briefe was written), he is aware that labor conditions in modern society is developing in a direction that prevents the actualization of the human. So long as labor is exploited, a state of physical necessity will persist for the majority and there will be no aesthetic state. Unless everyone is liberated from economic exploitation, reason will not be actual in society and a dynamic (i.e. administrative) state of some kind will continue to reign.

The second major obstacle that prevents society from becoming what it ought to become is a certain pathology of the ruling class that Schiller calls “lethargy” (Erschlaffung) but which we might simply call “disinterest.” Although the working class deserves our sympathy since they cannot be blamed for their unfree conditions, the ruling class have no one but themselves to blame for becoming “slaves to sense” (Sklaven der
Instead of trying to act or grasp the world as it is objectively constituted, the ruling class intoxicate themselves with aesthetic pleasures and indeterminate concepts:

Sie ziehen den Dämmerschein dunkler Begriffe, wobei man lebhafter empfindet, und die freiere Phantasie sich nach eigenem Belieben bequeme Gestalten bildet, dem Tageslicht deutlicher Erkenntnisse vor, die das beliebte Blendwerk ihrer Träume verjagen. Das Unbestimmte ist ihnen gerade recht, weil sie dadurch überhoben werden, sich nach den Dingen zu richten, und sich einbilden können, der Natur das Gesetz vorzuschreiben.

(The problem that Schiller tries to highlight here is the problem of social disinterest. The less we are bound by physical necessity, Schiller is saying, the more likely we are to bind ourselves under the yoke of indeterminate reflection. Today, the problem is no longer confined to the upper class for spectacles are now readily available for consumption in every stratus of society. Hollywood films, video games, YouTube, and other forms of media keep people occupied with spectacles rather than with real-world social affairs. Strangely enough, Schiller characterizes this problem as a problem of the will. The aesthetic state is a state where everyone is capable of contemplation, where humans play rather than will. For a universal “theoretical culture” to emerge, however, we must first develop a “practical culture” that encourages us to be decisive and take stance on social issues (“in so fern also Energie des Entschlusses nötig ist, um aus dem Zustand verworrnener Begriffe zu deutlichsten Erkenntnissen überzugehen, muß der Weg zu der theoretischen Kultur durch die praktische geöffnet warden,” he says) (TS 514). Hence the most urgent
issue of our time according to Schiller is not a “deficiency in knowledge” (*Unzulänglichkeit der Wissenschaft*) but a “failure of the will” (*Fehler des Willens*) (*TS* 514). For there to be an aesthetic state, it is not sufficient that we liberate ourselves from physical necessity; we must also develop a culture of action where people are motivated to change society so that the aesthetic condition is available to all. Willing is needed to create a condition of universal non-willing; work is necessary before we are in position suspend work. If we want everyone to become Pulcinellas, we must refrain from becoming one until the time is right.

From the above, we may infer the following. Aesthetic education is neither an education of the senses nor an education of reason. In fact, it is not even the education of an individual. Rather, it is the development of the social conditions necessary for aesthetic humans to emerge *en masse*. For Schiller, that means two things: (1) the economy has to be organized such that every person is free from physical necessity or labor exploitation; (2) the intellectual culture has to be developed such that people are interested in taking stances on social issues and in making the changes necessary for society to become a more organic, less pathologically distorted whole. It is only by fulfilling these conditions that reason can actualize itself as an aesthetic state. Whether this actualization of reason is likely to happen on a large-scale social level is something that Schiller himself has doubts about. Yet Schiller thinks a community of aesthetic humans is at least possible on a small-scale level. As he writes in a footnote at the end of *Ästhetische Briefe*:

Dem Bedürfnis nach existiert [der Ästhetische Staat] in jeder feingestimmten Seele, der Tat nach möchte man ihn wohl nur, wie die reine
Kirche und die reine Republik in einigen wenigen auserlesenen Zirkeln finden, wo nicht die geistlose Nachahmung fremder Sitten, sondern eigne schöne Natur das Betragen lenkt, wo der Mensch durch die verwickeltesten Verhältnisse mit kühner Einfalt und ruhiger Unschuld geht. (TS 676)

So long as a select circle of Pulcinellas exist, so long as there is a community of humans who experience their lives as a potential through shared forms of contemplation, the aesthetic state will be present in a small-scale form and it will not be an empty ideal. Yet so long as the market economy continues to dominate our material way of life, and so long as our intellectual culture is based on a certain fascination with the indeterminate and the non-actual, with reflection for reflection’s sake, we have little hope of turning society into an aesthetic state except through gradual political struggle. The path towards the redemption of humanity for Schiller is a long one. There is no possibility here of a quick revolution; the only way forward is through work.

As a political ideology, aesthetic humanism believes that one must take action against social deformations and injustice in order to actualize reason and thus create a condition where humans can encounter one another neither as force nor as persons but as human beings proper. Agamben would view this as another violent use of constituent power; for Schiller, however, it is only through the use of constituent power that destituent potential can be made available, not just for philosophers and artists, but for every human being. The politics evinced in the Ästhetische Briefe is not specific. It does not tell us which specific institutions have to be changed in what way for the aesthetic state to be actualized. Whether a democratically-elected representative government is needed for actualizing a
community of aesthetic humans is left open. Whether the market economy needs to be kept or abolished is not specified. As a political ideology, aesthetic humanism is unable to guide our actions. Aesthetic humanism only provides us with a normative framework to assess what constitutes a good society, but it does not tell us how best to bring about this society given the way things stand. As such, aesthetic humanism needs to be supplemented with social research. On its own, it is merely a prolegomenon towards a future politics.47

What makes the Ästhetische Briefe so original is that it reframes our political aspirations as being dependent on our conception of the human, which in turn is shown to be dependent on our metaphysical understanding of the relations between the self, the body, and the world. Schiller wants us to rethink our politics by redefining the human as a suspension of the tension between sense and reason, as a liberation of the body from the yoke of reason into the free play of potential use. For the most part, Schiller is an ally of Agamben, and throughout this chapter, I have tried to outline the different ways in which their projects are aligned with one another. The one aspect of Schiller’s theory that does not and cannot be made to fit with Agamben’s theory is the idea of the aesthetic state. As this section demonstrates, however, the fact that Agamben has to dismiss the idea of the aesthetic state as another instance of constituent power is not necessarily to his advantage. Agamben runs himself into a political dead-end. Schiller does not. If there is a good reason for us to read Schiller today, it is the fact that he shows us a way to embrace Agamben’s

47 Like Kant, Schiller views freedom as the primary norm driving modern society forward. Unlike Kant, however, Schiller believes modern society has a tendency to create more pathologies and deformations than progress towards freedom. The Ästhetische Briefe, as a political text, is Schiller’s attempt at giving a critique of modern society with an eye towards human emancipation. Viewed in a certain light, it can be described as an early precursor of Frankfurt School critical theory: an in-depth analysis of society is missing, but the normative framework for such analysis is in place.
analysis of modern society without embracing his “new figure of politics.” Contradictory as it may sound, even destituent potential needs actualization. For a community of aesthetic humans to come into being, we must work, we cannot just play. Schiller’s idea of the aesthetic state reminds us that political action is needed for contemplation to become a possibility not just for a few select individuals but for every human being. Until humanity and the state becomes one, until institutions are in place that allow every human being to live without work, we cannot be satisfied with playing the role of Pulcinella. We still have work to do.
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