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## Critical theory vs philosophical anthropology on radio and TV: some remarks on Adorno and Gehlen

### Abstract

*The relation between critical theory of society and philosophical anthropology is a very interesting and exciting but also problematic one. On the one hand, since Horkheimer's seminal essay Remarks on Philosophical Anthropology critical theorists have always expressed a clear distaste for anthropological speculation. On the other hand, notwithstanding Adorno's aim in Negative Dialectics to "vetoe any anthropology" and criticize "the question of man [as] ideological", he frequently mentioned the project of a "negative anthropology" or "dialectical anthropology" as an important one. In this context, it is especially noteworthy that Adorno developed a significant philosophical and also human relation during the 1960s with Arnold Gehlen, one of the founders of 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophical anthropology. In my contribution I will focus on some aspects of the Adorno/Gehlen relation, mostly approaching this topic at a historical-philosophical level rather than at a strictly theoretical level, and offering some remarks on certain affinities between their aesthetic theories and also on certain philosophical elements that emerge in a powerful and significant way from the public debates between Adorno and Gehlen that took place in the 1960s on radio and TV.*

### Keywords

*Aesthetics, Arnold Gehlen, Theodor W. Adorno*

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1.

On December 2, 1960 the critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno wrote a letter to the philosophical anthropologist Arnold Gehlen to explicitly and even emphatically express to him great appreciation for his philosophical-sociological interpretation of modern painting in the book *Zeit-Bilder. Zur Soziologie und Ästhetik der modernen Malerei* (1960): a book that can be probably considered as Gehlen's third masterpiece beside *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (1940) and *Urmensch und Spätkultur. Philosophische Ergebnisse und Aussagen* (1956). Although the correspondence between these two great German philosophers has unfortunately still not been officially published in Adorno's *Gesammelte Schriften* or in Gehlen's *Gesamtausgabe*, we can fortunately read certain passages of those letters thanks to the contributions of some scholars who had access to them. In the Epilogue written by Karl-Siegbert Rehberg – the most important pupil of Gehlen and probably the greatest expert of his philosophy, who was in any case also influenced by Frankfurt critical theorists (see Greco 2018) – for the edition of *Zeit-Bilder* included in Gehlen's *Gesamtausgabe* we can find the following observations, and also an excerpt from Adorno's abovementioned letter to Gehlen dated December 2, 1960:

Auch von anderer Seite bekam er [scil. Gehlen] teilweise überschwängliches Lob, sogar von einem politischen Kontrahenten wie Theodor W. Adorno. Diesen wichtigsten Vertreter der älteren Kritischen Theorie mochte – neben manchem kulturkritischen Motiv – mit Gehlen vor allem verbunden haben, dass auch dieser den "Gehalt" der Kunstwerke zum Gegenstand seiner Darstellung der modernen Künste gemacht hatte und auch sein konservativer Gesprächspartner die künstlerische Moderne durch eine spezifische Intellektualität zu bestimmen suchte. Nachdem er die ihm vom Autor übersandten "Zeit-Bilder" gelesen hatte, schrieb Adorno am 2. Dezember 1960: "Mein Eindruck davon ist außerordentlich. Besonders berührt haben mich eine Reihe von Übereinstimmungen der unerwartetsten Art [...] Sollte ich, auf einem Fuße stehend, sagen, was an Ihrem Buch so besonders mich berührt, dann ist es das, das Sie mit der Sache der neuen Kunst sich identifizieren, ohne in Apologetik zu geraten und das Moment von Negativität zu verleugnen, das zur Sache selbst notwendig dazu gehört. Darauf, genau darauf, kommt es aber an. Alles andere ist entweder Propaganda oder schlicht reaktionär" (Rehberg 2016: 557. Adorno's letter to Gehlen from December 2, 1960 is also quoted by Matteucci 2010: 87).

As we can learn from Stefan Müller-Doohm's outstanding biography of Adorno and still other sources, in their letters Adorno and Gehlen discussed in detail various philosophical, artistic and cultural questions, and also planned together some radio and television conversations and the topics

that these public debates between them, broadcasted on German radio and TV, would be focused on. While writing this article I luckily had the possibility to consult a reliable transcription of their letters and, on the basis of the information that is currently available on this still unpublished correspondence, we know that the two German philosophers exchanged 39 letters in quite a long period of time extended from November 16, 1960 to March 9, 1969: 28 letters from Gehlen to Adorno, and 11 letters from Adorno to Gehlen (see Rehberg 2019)<sup>1</sup>. This means that the correspondence took place in a period in which Adorno was working on some of his most important writings, including many essays on literature and music, several sociological works and, of course, his philosophical masterpieces *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and *Aesthetic Theory* (1970, posthumous). The last letter of Adorno to Gehlen was written on January 15, 1969, i.e. a few months before his unexpected and untimely death on August 6, 1969 that suddenly interrupted the writing process of his great unfinished *Ästhetikbuch*.

As noted by Wolf Lepenies (2006: 147), “it is amazing to see to what a large extent Theodor Adorno and Arnold Gehlen could agree in their views behind the veil of their private correspondence. Political differences melted away when matters of culture and philosophy were at stake”. A few important observations on the Adorno/Gehlen philosophical and human relation, as I said, can also be found in Müller-Doohm’s book *Adorno: A Biography* – while, quite surprisingly, there is no trace of it in another biography of Adorno, written by Detlev Claussen (2008). In fact, as Müller-Doohm clearly explains:

Although Adorno found Gehlen’s conservative theory of institutions unacceptable, and although he made no secret of that fact, he valued him as a debating partner and made efforts to keep on good terms with him personally. [...] His relations with Arnold Gehlen were significant in this respect. Gehlen had first been invited by Horkheimer to give a lecture at the institute in the winter of 1953. Gehlen was one of the conservative intellectuals from whom Adorno did not recoil; indeed, ever since their joint participation in the debates about art in Baden-Baden in October 1959, their initial politeness had given way to a more personal warmth. The correspondence between them, which lasted from 1960 to 1969, is proof of this. Adorno

<sup>1</sup> I would like to sincerely thank Prof. Dr. Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, editor of the complete edition of Arnold Gehlen’s works, for allowing me to read his reliable transcriptions of the correspondence between Adorno and Gehlen during an interesting and friendly email exchange that we have had since April 2019, and also for his explicit permission to use these transcriptions for my work on this topic. In the present article I will thus refer to the transcriptions of the Adorno/Gehlen *Briefwechsel* as “Rehberg 2019”.

always sent Gehlen his own publications and offprints; he read Gehlen's book *Zeit-Bilder* (1960) and was able to tell him that he had unexpectedly found himself in agreement with what Gehlen had written about modern art. What he particularly liked was Gehlen's defence of modern art "without lapsing into apologetics or denying the element of negativity that is an essential part of it". In addition, he emphasized: "When it comes to the analysis of the contemporary situation, including the socially prescribed dumbing-down and mystification, we are not likely to differ greatly. I would not be able to marshal anything by way of opposition to this other than what you call 'the a priori of experience', something that is very much in tune with my own way of thinking: I believe I am unable to give up the possibility and the idea of the possibility of this. I believe that without this idea it would not be possible to think at all, or even, strictly speaking, to say a single word". Adorno evidently regarded Gehlen as the ideal opposite number in radio or television debates, and they encountered each other in this way on four occasions. They also met privately with their respective wives, in January 1961 in Kettenhofweg and in October in Gehlen's home, from where they made an excursion to the Weinstraße and the cathedral in Speyer. Because both men were well aware of their political differences, the subject was excluded from their letters and their public discussions. Each man expressed opinions that were critical of the other's views on society. In this sense, the relation between the two intellectuals was based on mutual respect and on common philosophical interests, but not on genuine friendship (Müller-Doohm 2005: 378-9).

So, during the 1960s an important philosophical and human exchange characterized the relation between Adorno and Gehlen. Although not comparable to Adorno's relation to Horkheimer, Benjamin, Kracauer and other colleagues and friends of his, the Adorno/Gehlen relation is surely worthy of being taken into serious consideration. However, until recent times only few scholars have inquired into this relation and dedicated some works to it, and above all none of the existing works on this topic, although sometimes very interesting and relevant, has apparently paid specific attention to aesthetics – which is one of the reasons why the present article aims to contribute to the investigation of the Adorno/Gehlen relation and advance it. In fact, a particular role in their philosophical and human relation was played by the discussion of aesthetic questions and especially of problems concerning the specific "rationality of the aesthetic" (Bacchio 2021) and the progressive and seemingly unstoppable rationalization characterizing not only modern society at all levels but also the development of modern art and avant-garde movements. A comparative reading of some of their main writings on this subject – such as, in particular, Gehlen's treatment of 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-garde painting in certain parts of *Zeit-Bilder* (2016: 100-210) and Adorno's treatment of 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-garde music in *Philosophy of New Music* and other essays (Adorno 1999: 54-68, 123-214; Adorno 2002a:

181-202, 646-79; Adorno 2002b: 269-322; Adorno 2006: 7-102) – can clearly testify to this.

Quite interestingly (and at first sight also surprisingly, given Adorno's well-known suspiciousness towards most everything connected to mass culture), a great role in the Adorno/Gehlen philosophical and human exchange was played by a quite intensive and indeed strategic use of modern mass media like radio and television. In the final part of this article I will try to offer some observations on these points, showing some of their implications for our understanding of Adorno's aesthetics fifty-two years after his death (1969-2021) and fifty-one years after the posthumous publication of his unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* (1970-2021). However, before delving into these particular aspects it is important to first provide the reader with an adequate general background apropos of the relation between critical theory and philosophical anthropology.

The relation between these two leading traditions in 20<sup>th</sup>-century German philosophy has always been a very interesting and exciting but also problematic one. As noted by Martin Jay, critical theorists quite early on expressed an explicit "distaste for anthropological speculation": Horkheimer and Adorno "spurned [...] the possibility of a philosophical anthropology", and from the early 1930s until the late 1960s they always remained "faithful to [the] refusal to define a positive anthropology which characterized Critical Theory from the beginning" (Jay 1976: 56, 74, 266). At the same time, however, Jay also notes that "in Horkheimer's work" – and, as we will see, even in Adorno's work – "there appeared a kind of negative anthropology, an implicit but still powerful presence": "in Critical Theory there were an implicit negative metaphysics and negative anthropology – negative in the sense of refusing to define itself in any fixed way" (Jay 1976: 56, 65).

As I said, it was especially a strategic and quite intensive use of mass media like radio and television by Adorno and Gehlen that played an important role in the 1960s in the (partial) rethinking and redefinition of the relation between critical theory and philosophical anthropology. An excerpt from Adorno's and Gehlen's famous radio debate from February 3, 1965 entitled *Ist die Soziologie eine Wissenschaft vom Menschen?* – later transcribed and published as Appendix in Friedemann Grenz's book *Adornos Philosophie in Grundbegriffen* (1975), and emphatically defined by Rolf Wiggershaus as "a debate [that] turned at its close into a confrontation between two classic standpoints", "as if the Grand Inquisitor from Ivan Karamazov's story in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* was talking to a Jesus who was no longer silent" (Wiggershaus 1995: 588) – can be particularly significant and interesting in the present context. In fact, this excerpt per-

factly exemplifies the complexity of the philosophical relation between them:

GEHLEN: Mr. Adorno, you see the problem of emancipation here once again, of course. Do you really believe that the burden of fundamental problems, of extensive reflection, of errors in life that have profound and continuing effects, all of which we have gone through because we were trying to swim free of them. Do you really believe one ought to expect everyone to go through this? I should be very interested to know your views on this. ADORNO: I can give you a simple answer: Yes! I have a particular conception of objective happiness and objective despair, and I would say that, for as long as people have problems taken away from them, for as long as they are not expected to take on full responsibility and full self-determination, their welfare and happiness in this world will merely be an illusion. And it will be an illusion that will one day burst. And when it bursts, it will have dreadful consequences. GEHLEN: We have reached the exact point at which you say “yes” and I say “no”, or vice-versa, where I would say that everything we know and can state about mankind from the beginning up till now would indicate that your standpoint is an anthropological and utopian one, although generous, or even grandiose. ADORNO: It’s not so frightfully utopian at all, but I would rather simply say this to start with: [...] the difficulties because of which, in your theory, people seek out relief [...] the distress that drives people to seek out such forms of relief, derive precisely from the strain that is put upon them by institutions, namely by the organization of the world in forms that are alien to them and omnipotent over them [...] And it seems to me to be virtually a fundamental phenomenon of anthropology that people seek refuge in precisely the power that is causing them the injuries they suffer. Depth psychology even has a term for this: it is called “identification with the attacker” [...]. GEHLEN: Mr. Adorno, we have reached the end of our discussion and are running out of time. We can’t extend the discussion any further [...] But I would like to make another counter-accusation. Although I have the feeling that we are united in certain profound premises, it’s my impression that it is dangerous and that you have the tendency to make people dissatisfied with the little that still remains to them out of the whole catastrophic situation (Adorno and Gehlen 1965; quoted in Wiggershaus 1995: 589).

2.

A good starting point for a general presentation and discussion of the relation between critical theory of society and philosophical anthropology can be Horkheimer’s essay *Remarks on Philosophical Anthropology* (1935): an essay that was primarily directed in a critical way against Max Scheler’s version of philosophical anthropology presented in his famous work *Man’s Place in Nature* (1928) but whose critiques can be also extended to other versions of philosophical anthropology. Here, in fact, Horkheimer raises a series of very strong objections against the project *as such* of a philosophi-

cal anthropology that, with different nuances but with the same fundamental argumentation at the basis, will also return in Adorno's pronouncements on this topic many years later and, *mutatis mutandis*, also in Jürgen Habermas' very critical reviews from 1956 and 1970 of Gehlen's books *Urmensch und Spätkultur* and *Moral und Hypermoral* (see Habermas 1981). Horkheimer's main objections to philosophical anthropology are focused on the fact that the latter, according to him, explicitly or implicitly rests on an approach to the so-called "question of man" that, if critically investigated, unmistakably reveals to be undialectical instead of dialectical, unhistorical instead of historical, idealistic instead of materialistic, static instead of dynamic, affirmative instead of negative, ideological and uncritical instead of critical, and also grounded on the need to search for invariant essences instead of open to the "vertiginousness" of "a dialectics no longer 'glued' to identity" – where "the vertigo which this causes" will be later defined by Adorno as "an *index veri*" (Adorno 1990: 31, 33).

It is also possible to find many of these objections and critiques in several writings by Adorno in which, on the one hand, he declares to completely share Horkheimer's "critique of static anthropology" (letter from Adorno to Löwenthal from July 6, 1934; quoted in Jay 1976: 66), he recommends "skepticism toward anthropological theories of human invariants" (Adorno 2004: 8), and he even dares to claim that negative dialectics "vetoes any anthropology" because "the question of man [...] is ideological" in itself (Adorno 1990: 51, 124). On the other hand, however, it is also important to note that Adorno sometimes makes reference to what he calls a "negative anthropology" or "dialectical anthropology", for example in *Minima moralia* (Adorno 2005: 167), in his 1965-1966 *Vorlesung* on negative dialectics (Adorno 2007: 72), and also in the Foreword to *Negative Dialectics* in which he explicitly compares the philosophical task of developing a negative dialectics that "seeks to free dialectics from [its] affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy" (Adorno 1990: XIX) to the task of Ulrich Sonnemann's book *Negative Anthropologie* from 1969 (GS 6: 11): a book that Adorno also reviewed (GS 20/1: 262-3) and considered as connected by "an objective necessity" to the project of *Negative Dialectics* (GS 6: 11). If we simply add to all these remarks a quick reference to Adorno's observations from the early 1940s later published with the title *Individuum und Gesellschaft* which offer some intriguing "notes on a new anthropology" (Adorno 2003), or a quick reference to the Preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which famously relates the notes and sketches included in the last part of the book to the project of "a dialectical anthropology" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: XIX), then we immediately understand that, notwithstanding

all the abovementioned objections and critiques, the anthropological dimension still plays an important role in Adorno's thinking.

According to Rolf Tiedemann, Horkheimer and Adorno never published a book based on the *Notes and Sketches* section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* because of their "general critique of any non-historical anthropology that postulates a human essence as such": "a materialist anthropology [...] could have been the only anthropology pursuable by Critical Theory, would address the changeable human nature", and "would have almost nothing in common with traditional philosophical anthropology" (Tiedemann; quoted in Johanssen 2013: 5). And yet, at the same time, according to some scholars a negative anthropology focused on the (problematic, indeed) second nature of the human being was the centerpiece of Adorno's negative dialectics: "an anthropology without *anthropos*", so to speak (Breuer 1985; quoted in Johanssen 2013: 12). From this point of view, it also applies to anthropological thinking what Adorno sometimes claimed about the situation of art in the "administered world" after Auschwitz, namely that it is "impossible and necessary at the same time (*unmöglich und notwendig zugleich*)" (GS 16: 167).

As I said, some observations taken from Horkheimer's 1935 essay *Remarks on Philosophical Anthropology* can also prove useful in this context (namely, in the context of an article focused on Adorno rather than Horkheimer), because they perfectly exemplify some of the fundamental problems that critical theory *as such* always had with philosophical anthropology *as such*, understood in general as a philosophical theory based on the belief in "the existence of a human nature that is invariable in time" (Horkheimer 1993: 152). According to Horkheimer, indeed, a materialist, dialectical and at the same time utopian theory derived from Enlightenment that understands "the social life process" in which individuals and groups emerge as "not simply [consisting] in the representation or expression of human nature in general, but rather in a continuous struggle of individual human beings with nature" (that which, by the way, already contains *in nuce* the basic principles of the philosophical conception that a few years later would have been presented under the title *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), logically leads to skepticism towards the anthropological-philosophical belief in "a constant and unchanging human nature" (Horkheimer 1993: 151-2). On this basis, Horkheimer explicitly introduces the idea of a fundamental "difference between anthropological philosophy and materialism", and he even claims that philosophical anthropology "contradicts the theory of society" (Horkheimer 1993: 156, 158), i.e. represents its antithesis. As Horkheimer explains:

similarities among various groups are not the result of a consistency in human nature. [...] Human nature is continuously influenced and changed by a manifold of circumstances. One could even understand the existence of a human nature that is invariable in time as a result of processes that continuously renew themselves, processes in which human beings form an inextricable part. However, one cannot understand it as the expression of a person in and for itself. [...] The task that Max Scheler assigned to anthropology is unrealistic [...], is impossible to fulfill. [...] [His] way of stating the problem assumes a fixed, abstract hierarchy. It contradicts the dialectical character of historical events, in which the foundational structure of individual existence is always interwoven with that of the group, and can lead, at best, to paradigms not unlike those of the natural sciences. There is no formula that defines the relation among individuals, society, and nature for all time. [...] The desire to provide a foundation for action by way of insights into human nature has motivated phenomenology since its beginnings. [...] A theory free from illusions can only conceive of human purpose negatively [...]. Anthropology finds itself in danger of striving for too much or too little. It asks for and seeks a definition of human nature that extends from prehistory to the end of humanity, and it avoids the anthropological question par excellence, namely: how can we overcome an inhumane reality (since all human capacities that we love suffocate and decay within it)? Insofar as the first question can be posed meaningfully, its answer depends not only practically but also theoretically on every advance made in the second. [...] The meaning of all anthropological categories is changed in their very foundations concomitantly with great historical transformations. [...] The names remain the same, but the anthropological realities are altered. [...] The attempt to conceive of human beings either as a fixed or as an evolving unity is futile. [...] The argument that has been advanced against any concept of historically necessary transformations, namely that such a concept is contrary to human nature, must be put to rest once and for all. It may be true that the more liberal philosophical anthropologists are in fact not subject to this criticism and explicitly teach that we cannot predict what potentials mankind has yet to fulfill. However, their undialectical method has, at least for the social pessimism that emerges from allegedly conflicting experience, made their appeal to essence and determination seem "plebeian" and has distorted the actual state of affairs (Horkheimer 1993: 152-3, 156-7, 160, 171-4).

3.

One of Horkheimer's main objections to the project of a philosophical anthropology rests on the idea that the basic impulse that led Scheler (and a few years later also Gehlen, notwithstanding many important differences between them) to the development of a philosophical project of this kind actually derives from a need (*Bedürfnis*), i.e. from what may call an "anthropological need". In a basically analogous way, thirty years later in *Negative Dialectics* Adorno will ground some of his strongest critiques to Heidegger's fundamental ontology based on a phenomenological herme-

neutics of the *Dasein* (and later based on Being-historical thinking, *seinsgeschichtliches Denken*, after the so-called *Kehre* of the mid 1930s) on the idea that the basic impulse that led Heidegger to the development of a philosophical project of this kind actually derives from a similar need (*Bedürfnis*), i.e. from what Adorno himself called an “ontological need” (Adorno 1990: 61-96). So, whether it is an anthropological *Bedürfnis* or an ontological *Bedürfnis*, it does not seem to make a big difference for critical theorists in terms of the demystification and demythologization of this unauthentic need that is required for genuine critical thinking, namely in terms of the critical understanding of what Adorno would define the untruth (*Unwahrheit*) of these ways of philosophizing (see Marino 2019: 80-4). This discourse already emerges in a quite clear way from some passages of Horkheimer’s abovementioned essay on philosophical anthropology, where we read:

Modern philosophical anthropology stems from precisely the same need that the idealistic philosophy of the bourgeois era tried to satisfy from its inception: namely the need to lay down new, absolute principles that provide the rationale for action. These principles were especially needed after the collapse of the medieval order and its tradition of unconditional authority. The most important tasks of idealistic philosophy consisted in delineating abstract principles that provided the foundation for a meaningful existence and in bringing spiritual endeavors the fate of the individual and of all of humanity in harmony with an eternal purpose. [...] The role of philosophy is to give meaning and direction to this bewilderment. Instead of satisfying the individual’s demand for meaning by uncovering social contradictions and by providing a means of overcoming them, philosophy confounds the needs of the present age by analyzing only the possibility of “real” life or even of “real” death, and by attempting to cloak existence with a deeper meaning. [...] The project of modern philosophical anthropology consists in finding a norm that will provide meaning to an individual’s life in the world as it currently exists. [...] Certain doctrines press spiritual and intellectual energies, whether for purposes of mere show or of analysis, into the service of a higher justification and assurance that are nonetheless impossible and confusing. One such doctrine decrees that a particular form of human behavior, for example devotion to state and nation, constitutes the only true model of human existence. However, even the more liberal doctrines of human nature that fail to establish a particular teleology for human action, and that thus assimilate a notion of “risk” into their system, do the same (Horkheimer 1993: 153-6).

As we know from Adorno’s 1965 lectures on metaphysics, “in face of the experiences we have had” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “not only through Auschwitz but through the introduction of torture as a permanent institution and through the atomic bomb”, “the assertion that what is has meaning, and the affirmative character which has been attributed to metaphysics almost

without exception, become a mockery; and in the face of the victims it becomes downright immoral. [...] It is therefore impossible to insist after Auschwitz on the presence of a positive meaning or purpose in being” (Adorno 2000: 101, 104) – although in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno will add that not only after Auschwitz but “even prior to Auschwitz it was an affirmative lie, given historical experience, to ascribe any positive meaning to existence” (Adorno 2004: 152). Among the many epistemological, ethical, political, aesthetic and also metaphysical implications of Adorno’s well-known and deeply-rooted convictions about what it means to philosophize, write poems, compose music and indeed simply live *nach Auschwitz*, we may also mention the fact that, for him, the post-Auschwitz condition radically condemns both ontology and philosophical anthropology to what I have previously called *Unwahrheit*.

From Adorno’s critical point of view, both these forms of philosophizing seem to stem from the untrue need to postulate something like a positive meaning of the human existence and/or a positive meaning of Being in its entirety, either by grounding the belief in this meaning on a fundamental ontological structure of the *Dasein* and a Being-historical perspective on history as guided by a mysterious “destining (*Geschick*)” that Adorno explicitly dares to compare to a new form of mythological thought (Adorno 1990: 117-9), or by grounding this belief on the idea of a constant and unchanging nature of the *Mensch*. For Adorno this remains true even when the human nature, as it happens in Gehlen, is understood as a cultural one, i.e. as the “second nature (*zweite Natur*)” of an undetermined and “deficient being (*Mängelwesen*)” that is characterized by “a constitutional excess of impulses” and by “the law of relief (*Entlastung*)”, and for whom “the cultural world (*Welt*) exists [...] in exactly the same way in which the environment (*Umwelt*) exists for an animal”, so that “man is ‘a cultural being by nature’ (*von Natur ein Kulturwesen*)” (Gehlen 1988: 29, 108. On this topic, see also Adorno and Gehlen 1965: 225-8).

Among other things, taking all this into consideration is also important to prevent the reader from potential misunderstandings like that, for example, of putting near to each other and partially assimilating Adorno’s and Heidegger’s radical critiques to the project of a philosophical anthropology. In fact, although bound by a common skepticism towards philosophical-anthropological thinking, Adorno’s and Heidegger’s critiques of it are completely different and are grounded on incompatible and incommensurable reasons. In Heidegger’s case, this radical critique is precisely grounded on the idea of the primacy of a fundamental ontology of the *Dasein* (criticized by Adorno, in turn) over a philosophical anthropology of the *Mensch*, and

we can clearly find it, for example, in some of his Freiburg *Vorlesungen* of the early 1920s, in *Being and Time* (1927), in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929), and also in subsequent writings like *The Age of World-Picture* (1938) where he emphatically and dramatically claims: “Through anthropology, the transition of metaphysics into the event of the simple cessation and suspension of all philosophy is inaugurated” (Heidegger 2002: 75). As has been noted by Brian O’Connor (2004: 152), however, although seemingly bound to Heidegger by his objections to philosophical anthropology, Adorno actually “expresses disagreement with the anthropological essentialism that, he suspects, might be the result of Heidegger’s program *malgré lui*”. In Adorno’s case, *Negative Dialectics* is probably the work that includes some of his most pregnant and fitting critical observations on philosophical anthropology (or, as it were, his anti-anthropological observations), where we read:

The question of man [...] is ideological because its pure form dictates the invariant of the possible answer, even if that invariant is historicity itself. What man ought to be as such is never more than what he has been: he is chained to the rock of his past. He is not only what he was and is, however, but equally what he can come to be, and to anticipate that, no definition suffices. [...] We cannot say what man is. Man today is a function, unfree, regressing behind whatever is ascribed to him as invariant – except perhaps for the defenselessness and neediness in which some anthropologies wallow. He drags along with him as his social heritage the mutilations inflicted upon him over thousands of years. To decipher the human essence by the way it is now would sabotage its possibility. A so-called historical anthropology would scarcely serve any longer. It would indeed include evolution and conditioning, but it would attribute them to the subjects; it would abstract from the dehumanization that has made the subjects what they are, and that continues to be tolerated under the name of a *qualitas humana*. The more concrete the form in which anthropology appears, the more deceptive will it come to be, and the more indifferent to whatever in man is not at all due to him, as the subject, but to the de-subjectifying process that has paralleled the historic subject formation since time immemorial. That man is “open” is an empty thesis, advanced – rarely without an invidious side glance at the animal – by an anthropology that has “arrived”. It is a thesis that would pass off its own indefiniteness, its *fallissement*, as its definite and positive side. [...] That we cannot tell what man is does not establish a peculiarly majestic anthropology; it vetoes any anthropology. [...] We might be tempted to speculate anthropologically whether the turn in evolutionary history that gave the human species its open consciousness and thus an awareness of death – whether this turn does not contradict a continuing animal constitution which prohibits men to bear that consciousness. The price to be paid for the possibility to go on living would be a restriction of consciousness, then, a means to shield it from what consciousness is, after all: the consciousness of death. It is a hopeless perspective that biologically, so to speak, the obtuseness of all ideologues might be due to a necessity of self-preservation, and that the right arrangement of society would by no means have to

make it disappear – although, of course, it is only in the right society that chances for the right life will arise (Adorno 1990: 51, 124, 395-6. On this topic, see the poignant observations of Maurizi 2004: 18).

4.

On the basis of Adorno's abovementioned critical hints to the idea of man's fundamental "openness (*Weltoffenheit*)", "defenselessness", "neediness" and "open consciousness" connected to a specific "turn in evolutionary history", that can be probably understood as crypto-references to Gehlen's particular version of philosophical anthropology, it may probably appear surprising that it was precisely with Gehlen that Adorno developed a significant philosophical and also human relation during the 1960s. Namely, with one of the main figures of 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophical anthropology and – we can add – one of the most ideologically and politically compromised ones: a "right-wing intellectual [...] who had been a Nazi sympathizer", a "cultural anthropologist who had also incriminated himself through his open sympathy for National Socialism" (Müller-Doohm 2005: 378, 569). Given Gehlen's ambiguous past and controversial political inclinations, it may appear even more surprising that Adorno befriended him and developed such an intense philosophical dialogue with him rather than, for example, with another founder of philosophical anthropology like Helmuth Plessner, who was definitely closer to Adorno and Horkheimer as far as both his Jewish origins and his philosophical and political ideas were concerned. As noted by Rolf Wiggershaus:

while Adorno was earning his living in Los Angeles with the astrology project, Horkheimer was getting into greater and greater difficulties with the Institute in Frankfurt. Helmuth Plessner was travelling from Göttingen to Frankfurt two or three days a week to stand in for Adorno in part. Plessner, three years older than Horkheimer, had lost his job as a teacher of philosophy in Cologne in 1933 because he was Jewish, and he emigrated to the Netherlands in 1934. In 1939 he became the first professor of sociology at a Dutch state university, with an endowed chair at the University of Groningen. He survived the German invasion in the underground, and finally, at the age of sixty, was appointed to a new chair for sociology and philosophy at Göttingen. With his book on *The Stages of Organic Life and Man*, published in 1928, Plessner had become, alongside Scheler, one of the founders of modern philosophical anthropology. Unlike Scheler, he carried out his analyses from the point of view of social history. In 1952 the Sociology Department at the University of Göttingen, under Plessner's direction, had started an empirical and statistical study on the position of German university teachers, the results of which were published in three volumes in 1957-8. But Plessner saw himself above all as a social philosopher and sociologist of culture, and emphasized the significance of philosophy for sociol-

ogy. Helmut Schelsky later called him a 'Germanhater'. He thus had much in common with Horkheimer and Adorno. Yet the two of them regarded him with considerable reserve, and continued to do so as they did any third parties who were close to them (Wiggershaus 1995: 459).

Following the information provided by Stefan Müller-Doohm (2005) and Karl-Siegbert Rehberg (2013; 2016), and also the information on the Adorno/Gehlen relation offered by the abovementioned transcriptions of their letters, we know that they met for the first time at the end of 1953 (Müller-Doohm 2003: 934-5), although their correspondence only began in autumn 1960: to be precise, on November 11, 1960 with a letter from Gehlen to Adorno (see Rehberg 2019). As has been noted, "out of [their] private correspondence emerged a public one: in a series of publicly broadcasted discussions (mostly initiated by Adorno), the two thinkers displayed their different interpretations of social developments – and more surprisingly, their many points of agreement" (Rehberg 2021). Comparing the information achievable through all these sources, we know that the Adorno/Gehlen public debates that I have already hinted at took place: (1) on October 30-31, 1959 in the context of the Baden-Badener Kunstgespräche on the topic *Wird die moderne Kunst gemangelt?*, televised on November 1, 1959; (2) on January 31, 1964 on the topic *Öffentlichkeit – Was ist das eigentlich?*, broadcasted on radio; (3) on February 3, 1965 on the topic *Ist die Soziologie eine Wissenschaft vom Menschen?*, radio broadcasted on March 21, 1965; (4) on February 11, 1966 on the topic *Soziologische Erfahrungen an der modernen Kunst*, televised on March 28, 1966; (5) on June 3, 1967 on the topic *Freiheit und Institution – Ein Soziologisches Streitgespräch*, televised. In order to gain information on Adorno's and Gehlen's exchange of opinions and suggestions for the organization of their radio and television debates, especially their letters from August 8, 1963, December 21, 1963, July 24, 1964, August 8, 1964, October 7, 1964, September 10, 1965, October 5, 1965, October 6, 1965, March 23, 1967, April 10, 1967, April 14, 1967, and April 20, 1967 are surely of great interest (see Rehberg 2019).

Shifting the focus of our attention on aesthetics, it must be noted that especially Adorno's and Gehlen's public conversations on modern art from 1959 – which also included, among the guest speakers at the conference, Max Bense, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Jürgen Beckelmann, Egon Vietta, HAP Grieshaber and Konrad Farnet – and on sociological experiences with modern art from 1966 are of the greatest importance (Rehberg 2016: 557-8). In this context, it is worthy of notice that their first debate took place in 1959, one year before the publication of Gehlen's outstanding monograph on

modern painting *Zeit-Bilder*, while the second debate took place in 1966, namely six years after the publication of Gehlen's aesthetic masterwork that had deeply impressed Adorno who, in turn, in that same year published *Negative Dialectics* and was busy at writing *Aesthetic Theory*. With regard to the presence of aesthetic topics in the Adorno/Gehlen *Briefwechsel*, the information achievable through the abovementioned transcriptions of their correspondence shows that especially the letters from November 29, 1960, December 2, 1960, October 13, 1961, July 26, 1962, August 31, 1962, May 12, 1963, July 24, 1964, August 8, 1964, and January 21, 1965 provide useful and intriguing knowledge on Adorno's and Gehlen's exchange of their respective views on such authors and questions as Mahler, Strawinsky, Beckett, avant-garde art (especially expressionism and cubism), the sociology of art and music, and the role played by such concepts as "commitment (*Engagement*)", "crystallization (*Kristallisation*)", "falling silent (*Verstummen*)" or "relief (*Entlastung*)" in anthropology and aesthetics (see Rehberg 2019).

As I said, only a few scholars until today have tried to develop a comparative inquiry into Adorno's and Gehlen's philosophies. Anyway, in some works on philosophical anthropology and/or critical theory it is possible to find important references to potential or real affinities between Adorno and Gehlen. An important source, from this point of view, is represented by Axel Honneth's book *The Critique of Power* from 1985, where we read:

The anthropological argument that Adorno and Horkheimer develop in [some] remarks scattered throughout the text [*scil. Dialectic of Enlightenment*] is related to the analyses that Arnold Gehlen undertook in his philosophical anthropology. However, in comparison with this work the passages in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are less articulate and materially impoverished. They undertake solely the task of indicating the pre-historical background from which the process of regression in the history of civilization occurs. As they can be read in these few passages, the anthropological considerations of Adorno and Horkheimer do not, however, simply represent the thin remnants of the biologically better informed anthropology of Gehlen. Rather, they initially form the framework for an alternative philosophical-historical account. Whereas Gehlen regards the activity of conceptual orientation, by which humans in the practical realization of the appropriation of nature harness its overflowing plenitude, as a "productive accomplishment of unburdening" that compensates for the deficit of human instinct, Adorno and Horkheimer conceive the same process of the conceptual structuring of reality as the initial phase of reification. From this point of view, the process through which humans, under the imperative of self-preservation, place the natural environment at their conceptual disposal, emerges as the compulsive counterpart to a nature congealed into pure objectivity. [...] In the act of orientation that accompanies the process of working upon nature, humans have so consistently purified objectified nature of all uncontrollable surplus

that, on this developed level, modern technology and science can now be interpreted as the perfected institutions of a society in league with death. In these systems of an organized mimesis at a second level, which no longer reflect living nature but which rather reflect conceptually reified nature, the force of nature that social labor was originally supposed to overcome continues. Just as the methodological form of science merely repeats the regularities that reveal themselves from the viewpoint of obtaining practical disposal over nature, technology reproduces the elementary components of human administrative practice on an automated level. As the comparison with Gehlen's anthropology also suggests, the presupposition of this argument, which is already contained in the basic idea of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is an instrumentalist epistemology negativistically construed (Honneth 1993: 40-1).

The parts of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that Honneth takes into examination, in order to compare them to some theses presented by Gehlen in *Man: His Nature and Place in the World* (1988: 3-116), are also parts of Horkheimer's and Adorno's book that are quite rich in aesthetic considerations. More precisely, they are rich in aesthetics concepts that somehow will also form the basis of a part of Adorno's late *Aesthetic Theory*. Among such concepts (that, as noted by Borsari 1998, also have abundant anthropological implications) we can mention those of *mana*, magic and *mimesis* that are clearly connected to Adorno's famous definition of art as the "refuge for mimetic comportment" (Adorno 2004: 53): a definition that Adorno, in a relatively short but extremely dense and substantial excursus at the end of *Aesthetic Theory*, did not disdain to also develop in terms of philosophical-anthropological speculations on the origins of art (Adorno 2004: 325-31). Quite interestingly, this excursus in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* also includes a brief reference to Gehlen's essay *Über einige Kategorien des entlasteten, zumal des ästhetischen Verhaltens* (Adorno 2004: 309).

The relation of Adorno's and Gehlen's understandings of aesthetics must be signalled as a key issue, and for this reason the task of developing a systematic inquiry into this topic represents an important work to be accomplished in the field of Adorno scholarship. As testified by Adorno's emphatic appreciation of Gehlen's book *Zeit-Bilder* in the abovementioned letter from December 2, 1960 (which he immediately read when he received a copy of the book), the first and probably main field in which Adorno and Gehlen seemed to find a common ground to establish a relation and develop a philosophical dialogue was precisely the field of aesthetics. Due to the limited space of an article, and due to the fact that, as I said, in the present contribution I aim at mostly approaching this topic at a historical-philosophical level rather than at a strictly theoretical level, I will limit myself here to some indications of this key issue and some references to texts and

passages where it can be discerned. Apropos of this I suggest taking into consideration, for example, some intriguing affinities between Adorno's philosophical and sociological interpretation of so-called *neue Musik* and *musique informelle* and Gehlen's philosophical and sociological interpretation of so-called *peinture conceptuelle*, and also their converging interpretations of the overall development of modern art as guided by a general process of "subjectivization" and "aesthetic negativity".

In this context, it is important to note that a special role was played by the influence of the conception of modern painting, and especially cubism, developed by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler – explicitly mentioned in Gehlen's letter to Adorno from November 29, 1960. As is well-known, Gehlen's interpretation of 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-garde explicitly relied to a great extent on Kahnweiler's concept of *peinture conceptuelle*, although this concept also underwent a substantial revision in Gehlen's own treatment of it in *Zeit-Bilder* (Gehlen 2016: 100-130). Also Adorno admitted the influence that Kahnweiler's view of modern art had on him, as testified for example by his treatment of the notion of "abstract works of art" in his 1958-59 *Vorlesung* on aesthetics (Adorno 2009: 231-46). This important lecture course must be definitely numbered among the teaching activities in which Adorno first discussed in oral form several concepts and theses that he planned to later present in written form in his great and unfortunately unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* (see Müller-Doohm 2003: 944-50). In particular, in his lesson from January 20, 1959 Adorno explicitly mentioned Kahnweiler, as someone he valued a great deal, in order to support and strengthen his view of certain contemporary developments in modern art that had led to reduce the differences between artistic genres like music (with specific reference to his concept of "the aging of new music") and visual arts (Adorno 2009: 231-2). Beside this, from a historical-philosophical point of view it is also interesting to remind the reader that a few years after the publication of *Zeit-Bilder* Gehlen wrote an essay entirely focused on his interpretation of Kahnweiler's philosophy of art, now republished in vol. 9 of Gehlen's *Gesamtausgabe* (2016: 524-39); while Adorno, for his part, dedicated to Kahnweiler his essays *Jene zwanziger Jahre* and *Über einige Relationen zwischen Musik und Malerei*, now republished in his *Gesammelte Schriften* (GS 10/2: 499-506; GS 16: 628-42).

5.

As I have explained before, although emphatically raising very strong objections to the project of a philosophical anthropology based on the idea of a somehow constant and unchanging human nature, Adorno also hinted at the importance in our time of a philosophical task like that of developing a different form of anthropological philosophizing that he sometimes referred to as “dialectical anthropology” or “negative anthropology”. Adorno never systematically developed his views on this topic, but in various writings and lecture courses he limited himself to unsystematic and fragmented hints at what a dialectical or a negative anthropology could be. The hermeneutical hypothesis, so to speak, that I would like to put forward in the last section of this article is that Adorno, skeptical and suspicious as he was towards the underlying affirmative character of every positive conception of the human being – in the typical Frankfurt-school meaning of the word “affirmative”, first defined in Marcuse’s 1937 essay *The Affirmative Character of Culture* –, perhaps aimed to offer at least some hints at his *ex negativo* conception of the human being by means of an open debate with Gehlen as a dialogical partner. In this context, a fundamental role was played precisely by the abovementioned debates between Adorno and Gehlen broadcasted on German radio and television.

Returning now to the question of the role played by a certain use of mass media in the complex relation between critical theory and philosophical anthropology, and hence implicitly returning also to the question of Adorno’s own relation with mass media in general, it can be useful to remind the reader of Müller-Doohm’s abovementioned formulation according to which “Adorno evidently regarded Gehlen as the ideal opposite number in radio or television debates”. The question is: why did Adorno regard Gehlen (namely, a thinker quite distant and different from him from both a strictly philosophical and also a political point of view) in this way? A provisional attempt to answer this intriguing question might consist in pointing out that in the context of the theoretical framework of critical theory it was only conceivable to outline a dialectical or materialist anthropology *ex negativo*. If so, then the possibility of finding himself engaged in a public discussion with the most serious and ambitious proponent of philosophical anthropology at the time, namely with Gehlen, precisely allowed Adorno to offer some hints at his negative-dialectical anthropological view. For example, to offer some hints at his philosophical view of what human beings *have been* during the course of a civilization characterized by a tragic intertwinement of progress and barbarity, enlightenment and myth, *Vernunft*

and *Herrschaft* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 1-34), of what human beings *still are*, but also of what human beings *could potentially and utopically be* in “a legendary better future” (Adorno 2004: 324).

For Adorno, the power of “philosophical reflection [...] is necessary as a resistance to all the illusion with which reified consciousness surrounds us” in order “to penetrate and go beyond [...] the surface of the merely existent” (Adorno 2000: 114). I suggest that this concept of philosophical reflection can be also applied to the problematic relation between critical theory and philosophical anthropology, inasmuch as the latter’s attempt to immediately and permanently define the essence of the human being secretly rests on a reified idea of the human being that deprives it of the potentiality to transform itself and go beyond its actual form: an objection that was already present in Lukács’ critique of anthropological philosophizing (with specific reference to Feuerbach, in his case) as always implying, and indeed always resting on, a sort of freezing the human being “in a fixed objectivity”, and hence pushing “both dialectics and history to one side”: “precisely this”, for Lukács’, is “the great danger in every ‘humanism’ or anthropological point of view” (Lukács 1971: 186-7). With regard to this, it has been correctly observed that the Frankfurt School thinkers rejected “every doctrine of man’s invariant characteristics”:

Despite their differences in detail, Horkheimer, Adorno and Sonnemann were unanimous in their refusal to ask or answer the question “What is man?” – and indeed to make any positive assumptions about the essence of man. Broadly conceived, negative anthropology rests on this abstention from judgment; it originates in Marx’s understanding of human essence as “the ensemble of the social relations”, but as part of a critical social and cultural theory it is not limited to *ex negativo* determinations. By understanding the human being as the ensemble of what it is *not*, or what it failed to make of itself, negative anthropology resists the demand of spelling out what man can or should be, while holding on to the possibility of realising happiness and abandoning suffering in history. The idea of permanent *anthropogenesis* salvaged by negative anthropology requires a ban on any anthropological point of view that holds human essence fixed across historical epochs. [...] To speak only negatively about the human being means not to prescribe what it can or should be, but to account for what it lacks under the prevailing social conditions. [...] The more reason’s self-doubt is embraced, the more carefully the anthropological question can be approached. [...] By leaving man’s condition underdetermined, negative anthropology seeks to destroy images of future human conditions that block the way to an alteration of the present (Johanssen 2013: 1-3, 8).

The possibility of negating, during a public debate on such powerful mass media as radio and TV, the validity of the fundamental concepts of what Adorno considered as a positive, affirmative and ideological anthropology,

and thus he explicitly rejected; the possibility of raising powerful objections in radio and television live broadcast “to the way in which [Gehlen] deduced the necessity of an authoritarian society from human nature, from certain anthropological constants” (Müller-Doohm 2005: 378): this possibility probably appeared to Adorno as a good way to also hint *ex negativo* at a dialectical and materialist anthropological conception. So, Adorno’s particular relation to mass media – namely, his radical criticism of, but also his extensive engagement with, mass media forms – somehow offered the possibility of negatively indicating his interest in what he called “negative anthropology”.

As is well-known, 2019 was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Adorno’s death: several books were published and many events were organized in his honour. The promoters of the International Conference *Adorno and the Media*, organized in December 2019 at the University of Arts and Design in Karlsruhe, correctly noted in the conference program that, “as relentlessly ‘negative’ as Adorno analyses were, he nonetheless dealt in a practical-critical register with the world of the media, broadcasting and television, and knew how to use such mediums for the project of critical theory” (Hartle *et al.* 2019). In my view, this also applies to the use of such mediums for the task of differentiating the project of critical theory from other contemporary projects and approaches such as philosophical anthropology, while at the same time outlining a negative-dialectical anthropology or at least providing hints at the possibility of a philosophy of this kind. If so, then the Adorno/Gehlen relation also proves important to confirm what also other works from Adorno quite clearly testify, such as his 1963 musicological work *Der getreue Korrepetitor. Lehrschriften zur musikalischen Praxis* that included a chapter of *Anweisungen zum Hören neuer Musik* deriving from a cycle of radio transmissions made by Adorno for the Norddeutscher Rundfunk (GS 13: 188-248), or still other works deriving from Adorno’s intensive presence in radio transmissions, already in his youth but especially after the end of the Second World War and his return to Germany after some years spent in exile in the USA.

On this basis, the example of the Adorno/Gehlen radio and television conversations proves important to confirm what we may call Adorno’s two-fold – but not at all ambiguous or, say, merely contradictory, but rather insightful and strategic – relation to mass media. In fact, on the one hand, he *theoretically* criticized radio and television as “graphically express[ing] the regression of enlightenment to ideology” in the context of his theory of the culture industry as “Enlightenment as mass deception”. As he famously wrote: “in film and radio [...] enlightenment consists primarily in the calculation of effects and in the technology of production and dissemination; the

specific content of the ideology is exhausted in the idolization of the existing order and of the power by which the technology is controlled" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: XVIII-XIX). On the other hand, however, Adorno *practically* never disdained to use mass media whenever he could, in order to reach a broader audience, promote his philosophical, sociological and also musicological views, and thus spread the ideas that characterized the Frankfurt School's critical conception of society. As has been noted, "by the end of the 1950s Adorno was no longer an unknown, and this was connected with the fact that, in addition to his books and articles, he had become a public figure through his activities in the media, particularly the radio" (Müller-Doohm 2005: 373). From this point of view, modern mass media proved important for Adorno to achieve some of his aims as an *engagé* intellectual of his time, and the Adorno/Gehlen philosophical and human relation also proves interesting and intriguing in this respect, thus emphasizing once more the relevance of a critical comparison between the philosophical paths of these authors as an important task to be accomplished in the field of contemporary *Adorno-Forschung*.

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