

## The Aesthetics of Natural History

Tobias Heinze

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### Abstract

The prior issue of *Krisis* (42:1) published *Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto*, with the aim to instigate a debate of the issues raised in this manifesto – the necessary re-thinking of the role (and the concept) of nature in critical theory in relation to questions of ecology, health, and inequality. Since *Krisis* considers itself a place for philosophical debates that take contemporary struggles as starting point, it issued an open call and solicited responses to the manifesto. This is one of the sixteen selected responses, which augment, specify, or question the assumptions and arguments of the manifesto.

### Keywords

Critical theory, Critical naturalism, Adorno, Aesthetics, Climate crisis, Schelling

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Nature's mutability exceeds nature's malleability. If nature is "the totality of as yet unmastered elements with which society must deal" (Horkheimer 1972, 210), the present situation can be described as a continued naturalisation of society – for nature, despite attempts to master it, increasingly strikes back. It is open to debate whether this paradox of historicised nature (Malm 2019, 170-173) constitutes a second dialectic of the domination of nature. As the Manifesto notes, the dialectic of society and nature described in Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not include existentially threatening dynamics such as the climate crisis or species extinction (Gregoratto et al. 2022, 117). We are therefore in need of a model that allows us to discuss whether the social repercussions of a drastically changing *outer* nature are of the same contingent necessity as the dynamics described by Horkheimer and Adorno, and thereby qualify as the effects of a second dialectic of the domination of nature.

Theorizing a critical naturalist aesthetics of nature – mentioned but not developed in the Manifesto (Gregoratto et al. 2022, 109; 123) – is a potential starting point for disclosing and describing the present state of the intertwinement of the social and natural aspects of our world. In the following, I suggest connecting Adorno's *Idea of Natural-History* and his *Aesthetic Theory* (Adorno 2002; 2006, cf. Pensky 2021) in order to develop a non-reductionist aesthetics of nature that rejects both backward-looking idealisations of the experience of a purportedly pristine nature, and the claim that the irreversible loss of untouched nature allows the aesthetics of nature to be done away with.

In his *Idea of Natural-History*, Adorno develops a nuanced account of the dialectics between nature and history (Whyman 2016). Instead of merely clarifying the concepts of nature and history by their juxtaposition, he reconstructs the specific moment of nature in history and vice versa: pre-revolutionary human history can be characterised by a nature-like eternal recurrence of the same, while nature does have the feature of decay, ultimately a historical form of its mutability.

But how are we to discern the current state of this dialectic? Adorno's theory of the art-nature relation is an entry point. The latter can best be understood by a detour through Schelling's

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*System of Transcendental Idealism* (Schelling 1978). Here, Schelling outlines how the philosophical knowledge that nature is always already productivity *and* product at the same time can be presented in such a way as to make this simultaneity sensible to the I. Contrary to the title's suggestion, the two-sidedness of nature becomes sensible in the artwork and not through the philosophical system, which nevertheless contains the arguments supporting this claim. The unconscious productivity of nature expresses itself in the artwork, mediated through the artist's skill.

Adorno's discussion of the art-nature relation in his *Aesthetic Theory* is to a large extent built on Schelling's thought (Flodin 2018; Heinze 2022). He too discusses the artist's work as a result of the mediation of subjective intention and unconscious dynamics – both, again, mediated by a natural moment. In contrast to Schelling, Adorno's concept of nature is informed by his notion of Natural History, allowing for a complex and nuanced discussion of the historicity of nature. The artwork consequently does not only contain a nonpropositional truth content that can be disclosed via aesthetic reflection (Richter 2006); it can also be understood as a specific point of reference for approaching what nature *is* at a given historical moment, keeping in mind how Adorno theorises the presence of nature in art.

If Critical Naturalism is to develop an aesthetics of nature along these lines, it has to argue in favour of a twofold extension of Kantian aesthetics: first, the historicity of outer and inner nature has to be taken into account; and, second, the focus of the aesthetics of nature has to expand from outer nature and the notion of natural beauty alone to including also those artefacts that serve as a starting point for aesthetic reflection. If Adorno is right about the art-nature relation, Natural History is present in works of art in a mediated yet disclosable form.

Aesthetic reflection informed by this line of reasoning enables light to be shed on the current state of Natural History as a truth content that is accessible by the interpretation of artworks. This allows us to uncover the central traits of our present, naturalised situation, and therefore to discern the conditions the dialectics of nature and society present us with in the attempt to answer the question whether society is confronted with a second dialectic of the domination of nature.

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## Biography

**Tobias Heinze** is a doctoral researcher at the Institute for Social Research and a PhD candidate in Social Philosophy at Goethe University Frankfurt. He studied Sociology and Political Theory in Frankfurt, Darmstadt, Münster, and New York and has recently been a visiting doctoral researcher at the School of Philosophy and Art History at the University of Essex. In his PhD thesis, he analyses Schelling's contribution to a Critical Theory of Nature. He also researches contemporary and historical challenges of Critical Theory, such as the relationship between psychoanalysis and social philosophy. He is co-editor, with Martin Mettin, of the volume "*Denn das Wahre ist das Ganze nicht...*" *Beiträge zur Negativen Anthropologie Ulrich Sonnemanns* (Neofelis, 2021).