

Constellation and vision

— Motives of vision in Adorno philosophy

Masafumi Aoyagi *

Introduction

In this paper, I consider Theodor W. Adorno's visual concepts. In particular, I focus on "looking" and "appearing" and the metaphor of the constellation (*Konstellation*). For some, his ideas on aesthetics and artistic theory are more emblematic, but for himself, the concept of hearing is more important. Martin Jay notes, "German philosophy, ever since the Reformation, seems to have been less positively inclined toward vision than the French. In general, German thinkers have tended to privilege aural over visual experience, as indicated by their tendency to draw on poetry or music rather than painting in their work." (Jay, 265) Adorno discussed the concept of hearing through his music theory. In this way, ocularcentrism has been handed down in the tradition of German philosophy. Jay also observes, "Even Marxists like the members of the Frankfurt School appreciated the force of the taboo on images (*Bilderverbot*) explicitly derived from the ancient Jewish interdiction but implicitly in accordance with a long-standing German inclination." (Ibd.) Therefore, when we discuss visual concepts in Adorno, it may be appropriate to speak about his anti-visual discourse with the superiority of hearing. However, in my paper, I would like to consider the constellation as a visual metaphor inherent in Adorno's writing.

* Lecturer, the Faculty of Letters, Ritsumeikan University

1. Constellation and vision

Adorno's constellation metaphor comes from Walter Benjamin's application of the same metaphor, so it is appropriate to start with a description of Benjamin's use in his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. He uses this metaphor to describe the relationship between idea (*Idee*) and phenomenon. He said as follows:

Phenomena do not [...] enter into the realm of ideas whole, in their crude empirical state, adulterated by appearances, but only in their basic elements, redeemed. They are divested of their false unity so that, thus divided, they might partake of the genuine unity of truth. In this their division, phenomena are subordinate to concepts, for it is the latter which effect the resolution of objects into their constituent elements. (Benjamin, 33)

As the salvation of phenomena by means of ideas takes place, so too does the representation of ideas through the medium of empirical reality. For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration [*Konfiguration*] of these elements. (Ibd., 34)

The set of concepts which assist in the representation of an idea lend it actuality as such a configuration. For phenomena are not incorporated in ideas. They are not contained in them. Ideas are, rather, their objective, virtual arrangement, their objective interpretation. (Ibd.)

Its [=ideas] significance can be illustrated with an analogy. Ideas are to objects as constellations [*Sternbilder*] are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts nor their laws. They do not contribute to the knowledge of phenomena, and in no way can the latter be criteria with which to judge the existence of ideas. The significance of phenomena for ideas is confined to their conceptual elements. (Ibd.)

Ideas are timeless constellations [*Konstellation*], and by virtue of the elements' being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed; [...] (Ibd.)

Benjamin uses the constellation metaphor to describe the relationship between ideas and phenomena. This relationship has several characteristics. First, an idea is not aggregate or a summation of phenomena, and hence both are not perfectly matched. Next, one is not necessarily superior to the other. Neither are consistent in this sense, but they seem to be consistent in the formal relationship of arrangement and elements. With the above characteristics, he expresses the relationship between constellations and stars.

Now I will consider the constellation metaphor in Adorno's earlier lectures. He said as follows:

[...] in that the singular and dispersed elements of the question are brought into various groupings long enough for them to close together in a figure out of which the solution springs forth, while the question disappears - so philosophy has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences, into changing constellations, or, to say it with less astrological and scientifically more current expression, into changing trial

combinations, until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears. The task of philosophy is not to search for concealed and manifest intentions of reality, but to interpret unintentional reality, in that, by the power of constructing figures, or images, out of the isolated elements of reality, it negates questions, the exact articulation of which is the task of science [...]
(Adorno 1977, 127)

In regard to the manipulation of conceptual material by philosophy, I speak purposely of grouping and trial arrangement, of constellation and construction. The historical images, which do not constitute the meaning of being but dissolve and resolve its questions are not simply self-given. They do not lie organically ready in history; not showing [*Schau*] or intuition is required to become aware of them. They are not magically sent by the gods to be taken in and venerated. Rather, they must be produced by human beings and are legitimated in the last analysis alone by the fact that reality crystalizes about them in striking conclusiveness. (Ibd., 131)

It is not a matter of clarifying concepts out of one another, but of the constellation of ideas, namely those of transience, signification, the idea of nature and the idea of history. One does not refer back to these ideas as “invariants;” the issue is not to define them, rather they gather around a concrete historical facticity that, in the context of these elements, will reveal itself in its uniqueness. (Adorno 1984, 120)

Adorno's lectures, in which Benjamin's influence is pronounced, are different from the latter in subject and content. Therefore, we cannot simply

understand the differences between their viewpoints. However, his lectures must be based on Benjamin's constellation metaphor. One indication is that Adorno understood the constellation as an idea, which is consistent with Benjamin.

Now I will move on to examine the relationship between the constellation metaphor and vision. First, when we look at something, we look at a phenomenon of something, and what we see is consistent with what appears to us. For example, when we look up at the night sky, what are we looking at? According to Adorno and Benjamin's arguments, we are looking at the stars. In other words, what appears to us are the stars as a phenomenon, which are consistent with what we are looking at. The stars appear in a kind of arrangement, which we generally consider a constellation. In other words, in the form of arrangement, that stars are in agreement with the constellation in the form of agreement. This general understanding arises because a constellation is derived from vision and is itself visual. However, according to Adorno and Benjamin's views, a constellation is represented by, but not always is consistent with, what we are looking at. This inconsistency is caused by different meaning or content included in the arrangement. What manifests to us is not the constellation but the individual stars. The constellation is represented with latent meaning, which is different from what we are looking at. Therefore, it is always possible for the constellation to betray our vision, so in this respect, it has anti-visual character.

2. The historicity of the constellation

Why does the constellation have anti-visual character although it is originally being visual? It is because the constellation is historical. The fact that the

constellation is historical means no mechanical temporal progression; therefore, the constellation does not automatically correspond to what we see in our visual field and does not have a temporal progression we could calculate. Rather, the constellation has different time-based characteristics than we do. Therefore, the constellation is represented with meanings different from those we see and our “intention” which Adorno noticed. But this difference does not mean that the constellation is independent of our vision and intention. Rather, our seeing allows us to be aware of the constellation’s another temporality, and the constellation’s historicity is indispensable to our vision and intention to look at it.

A constellation is anti-visual because it has historicity, but this historicity requires a relationship with vision. Therefore, the fact that the constellation is *anti-visual* does not mean that it is *not visual*.

3. Vision and semblance

As mentioned above, the constellation as an idea has anti-visual character in our visual field. In other words, what we see must be consistent with the stars as phenomena, even if it is not consistent with the constellation. Adorno’s understanding of the relationship between this seeing and the phenomena differs from Benjamin’s.

In Benjamin’s case, the phenomena are certainly consistent with what we see, but these contain a semblance (*Schein*), literally translated to “appearance.” In contrast, it is an idea to bring the truth to us. As mentioned in the above quotation, the semblance makes the phenomena “their crude empirical state,” which brings about “their false unity” with the idea. A world of phenomena including such a semblance would be a world of only rubble and

ruins. Rather, in our visual field, the constellation as the idea is represented which is “the genuine unity of truth,” and the stars have meaning as long as they are elements of this idea and are distinguished from the semblance. Therefore, for Benjamin, semblance is a false visual phenomenon and nothing more than “appearance.” For him, semblance is visual, but negatively evaluated as false.

On the other hand, Adorno discussed semblance in the context of the relationship between nature and history in his lecture:

[...] I mean semblance in the [...] sense of second nature. This second nature is a nature of semblance in that it presents itself as meaningful and its semblance is historically produced. Second nature is illusory because we have lost reality yet we believe that we are able to meaningfully understand it in its eviscerated state, [...] (Adorno 1984, 123-124)

[...] what is remarkable is that the inner-historical essence is itself semblance of a mythical kind. (Ibd., 124)

The element of the actuality of semblance in contrast to its simple pictorialness, that we perceive semblance as expression everywhere that we come up against it, that it cannot be described independently of its semblance – this is also a mythical element of semblance. (Ibd.)

I am referring to that element of reconciliation that is present whatever the world appears most as semblance: the promise of reconciliation is most perfectly given where at the same time the world is most firmly immured from all “meaning.” (Ibd.)

As can be seen from these excerpts, Adorno also inherits Benjamin's understanding and regards semblance as a phenomenon with a false meaning. However, unlike Benjamin, Adorno understands the meaning of semblance, which appears to us as reality. But Adorno does not simply claim that the semblance is not false, he claims it as true because he finds historicity in semblance (or our vision). This historicity does not refer to history that conflicts with nature and myths, but refers to the historicity of history and of nature. Of course, this also shows that there is naturality or mythicalness of history. In this way, semblance presents a false arrangement as an "appearance" apart from the idea, has meaning manifested as real phenomena, and turns into what includes other kind of truth than the idea's one. Adorno acknowledges that a phenomenon consistent with what we see is simply an appearance, and that the false meaning in fact contains a kind of truth. For Adorno, semblance itself is something appearing and realistic, and he evaluates semblance positively as long as it brings about an element of reconciliation.

As described above, visual semblance can be considered to be anti-visual as long as its true meaning is different from its appearance.

4. Constellation and salvation/reconciliation

The historicity of constellation and the truth of semblance showed a change from visual to anti-visual and from anti-visual to visual. It is salvation and reconciliation that Adorno and Benjamin assert as unifying this change. They understand salvation and reconciliation as a unification of the truth, but, as in the case of semblance, there is a difference between them.

As mentioned above, Benjamin claimed that while the phenomenon is

redeemed into the idea, “the genuine unity of truth” is realized and the constellation as an idea is represented to us. Then we receive the represented constellation in our visual field. The constellation is not consistent with what we are looking at, so we cannot actively see the constellation. In this respect, we are passive to the constellation, which also implies that we are passive to the salvation of the phenomenon. Therefore, we cannot realize the salvation and unification of the truth by ourselves. In other words, we are not a subject of the salvation. According to Benjamin, the subject of salvation and unity is not on our side.

In contrast, Adorno claimed reconciliation occurred in the context of the relationship between nature and history. On the one hand, the historical loses its historicity and turns into the natural, and on the other hand, the natural could turn into the historical. The constellation is anti-visual because it has historicity, but it is inseparable from what we are looking at. Therefore, even though the constellation is not consistent with our looking, it changes to the visual through its representation. Through this change, the constellation is fixed in our visual field and becomes what we can see. With this, the constellation loses its historicity, but at the same time, another constellation will be represented to us. The constellation is fixed in our vision, but it is represented with another arrangement, one after another.

Semblance is also one of the phenomena we can perceive. This semblance is false because of its inconsistency with the idea but has real meaning itself. This meaning is different from what we see as truth in our visual field. Semblance, namely, is freed from being fixed as only something we can see. Therefore, semblance could change in terms of history.

As described above, this process of change in constellations and semblance also has historical character in itself. This series of historical processes would

bring reconciliation, but the constellation is not necessarily the subject of reconciliation. In this historical process, the subject of reconciliation changes from constellation to constellation, or between constellation and semblance. This subjectivity is not fixed, and the subject itself also changes historically.

Conclusion

The constellation is indispensable to vision and is visual in itself. However, the constellation is represented chaotically to our visual field. To some extent, the constellation has anti-visual character because the constellation contains historicity. Yet the constellation is not necessarily historical and anti-visual; it is forced to be visual by our act of looking. On the contrary, semblance, which is visual, could change the anti-visual as long as it has meaning more than appearance. The constellation's anti-visual character transforms into visual, and that visual character in turn can transform into anti-visual. This relationship between vision and anti-vision is supposed to unify—that is save and reconcile. This results in the task of identifying the subject of constellation representation. While the constellation's subjectivity as a philosophy is assumed, it is also found that subjectivity changes historically in our visual field.

The constellation metaphor shows, on the one hand, the anti-ocularcentrism in Adorno (and German philosophy), but on the other hand, we must be conscious of the relationship with vision through this metaphor. I think “the taboo on images” also shows the negative relationship with the vision, and in some cases it shows even privilege of the vision.

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