Interview

A Democratic Enlightenment:
The Reconciliation Image, Aesthetic Education, Possible Politics
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Christiane Wagner in discussion with the author Morton Schoolman

Christiane Wagner: I believe it is clear that your work on a democratic enlightenment is rooted, in part, in your critique of one of the most fundamental political commitments belonging to today's western democratic societies. Despite "all-inclusiveness" playing a defining role in your concept of the reconciliation image, you have serious concerns about the limitations of the so-called "inclusive" society. What are the central themes of *A Democratic Enlightenment,* and how are they linked to your critique of inclusiveness? And while some form of political education is needed to teach democratic societies about the failings of inclusion and how reconciliation remedies these failings, why must such an education be "aesthetic"? What political lessons are taught by cinematography and its arts of the moving image you focus on? And how is such an education democratic?

Morton Schoolman: Thanks, Christiane, for the opportunity to discuss my new book. Your first questions go right to the heart of my work and offer me the opportunity to lay out several of its central arguments before taking up other issues you raise.

To begin with, the defining problem of *A Democratic Enlightenment* is the violence inflicted on difference that women, persons of color, gays, Jews and Muslims among other ethnic and religious groups, and the working classes endure in modern democracies. My interest is in misogyny, racism, antisemitism, religious discrimination, homophobia, and classism. Put another way, my theoretical and political interests are in the plight of difference as it is constructed as the Other by identities who establish, maintain, and perpetuate norms ruling the democratic world. No matter what subtle or unsubtle forms of marginalization, exclusion, and discrimination this violence takes, they are as much forms of violence toward difference as its extermination. For marginalization, exclusion, and discrimination undermine the conditions allowing human life to flourish. And such compromise of the conditions of human life is, over time, its extermination.

Now, in view of the long history of such unbroken violence towards difference, my first concern is the way those who have struggled against violence toward difference in liberal democracies have opposed it. We must ask whether liberal politics and its rule of law have successfully attenuated violence toward differences through political and legal means extending, protecting, and guaranteeing human rights to achieve inclusiveness. To be sure, I am not implying that political and legal reforms have failed to bring an end to much of the violence difference as otherness suffers in modern democracies, which has been the great accomplishment of the civil rights, feminist, and gay rights movements, and to some small extent of the precarious political struggles for the rights of immigrants who suffer so terribly today. Yet, as I argue in *A Democratic Enlightenment*, by narrowly framing debate about the relationship between democracy and difference in ways confining ameliorative policies to inclusiveness, liberal politics and its legal-juridical institutions have become unwitting collaborators in the political and cultural constructions of difference as otherness, hence in the violence toward difference.

CW: Would you explain how?

MS: Writing in America I have been witness to how politics and the rule of law, narrowly confined to the liberal political imaginary of inclusiveness, have failed to remediate the violence of misogyny, racism, homophobia, antisemitism, classism, ethnic and religious discrimination. This is because such violence toward difference festers within the *liberal private sphere*—in the family, the community, the workplace and religious institutions, in civil society as it forms its associations around and through these ensembles of private relations. It is in the private sphere, *beneath* the threshold of liberal politics and the law, where everyday violence toward difference thrives, even if it does not first originate there. The private sphere is home to xenophobic communities of dominant genders, races, sexualities, religions, and ethnicities, home to identities whose self-ascribed truths of their superiority are secured through constructions of difference that perpetuate violence toward difference as the Other.

The problem we must engage is how the limitations of such difference-liberalism can be surmounted? My answer is that the limits of inclusiveness can be overcome through a democratic enlightenment whose pedagogical goal is nothing less than the political transformation of the private sphere. Whereas such a political transformation proceeds from the recognition that liberalism's commitment to inclusiveness, which is based on its principle of tolerance, of the right to be and to become different, fails to shield difference from the violence inflicted on it as the Other, a democratic enlightenment would teach individuals in their private lives to overcome their practices of constructing difference as otherness.

In the past this lesson has been taught by art, most recently by film, whose reconciliation image models how the construction of difference as otherness can be overcome. Recently I acquired a powerful ally in my argument for a democratic enlightenment. As President Biden put it in May 2021 when signing the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, "But of *all the good* that the *law* can do, we have to change our hearts." Real political progress, ending violence undermining the conditions of real human progress for those different from the norm, can occur only by going beyond the limits of politics and the rule of law, beyond liberalism's narrow political imaginary of inclusiveness.

CW: From your argument the limits of inclusiveness are thus linked to a deeper problem avoided in discussions about difference. Difference is included, tolerated, but only as the Other, though liberals are loath to concede that no matter what political and legal mechanisms are in place to guarantee the rights of those not identity-normative, most often violence toward difference does not rise to the level of intervention by the state but, remaining out of sight beneath politics and the law, operates with impunity.

MS: Precisely Christiane. The limits of inclusiveness reveal a much deeper problem—that of the pathologies of the private sphere that can be eliminated only through its transformation, which requires an educational project, a project of democratic enlightenment that places emphasis not on inclusiveness only, but on the reconciliation of identity and difference, the highest of all democratic ideals for those who value difference above all. Difference is the most democratic because it is the most human of all values.

CW: By explaining the reasons for a democratic enlightenment, you introduce the political role to be played by education—teaching the ideal of reconciliation a democratic enlightenment would realize. Then, arguing that such an education has been offered historically by art, you theorize "aesthetic education," one whose pedagogical media has become film. If the form of education you propose was not already unfamiliar, its historical development from the artwork to film is even more so.

MS: Your interest in this all-important question invites discussion of what I found to be the most fascinating part of my project. As prologue to taking up in greater depth and detail the historical figures whose theoretical contributions to a democratic enlightenment I anticipate you'll want me to discuss, let me first explain why the ideal of reconciliation was originally the political curriculum of an aesthetic education whose classroom in our own time has become film.

It is not a historical coincidence that the first argument of a theoretical kind for aesthetic education, which assigns art the moral task of teaching the ideal of reconciliation, appears at the very time two other revolutions are also taking place—the violent birth of early modern democracies and the explosive development of new arts and new art forms in the arts of that same time. I am referring, of course, to Friedrich Schiller's 1795 *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Humanity*.

For Schiller, the early modern period's sheer proliferation of new arts and new art forms held promise for aesthetic representations of the human and natural worlds' infinite diversity of differences as they actually appear. Held promise, in other words, for art free of the violence of representing the world as other than it is. With Schiller we have a first theoretical formulation of art performing the work of aesthetic education. Art now could model the reconciliation of identity, or aesthetic form, and difference, the diversity of the sensuous world, through "play," the creative use of a multiplicity of aesthetic forms. Art could model reconciliation through plural representations exemplifying aesthetic forms' openness to the world, a receptivity Schiller thought allowed aesthetic form to produce mimetic images—*imitations*—of appearances representing the world just as it is. By modeling reconciliation art *taught* reconciliation, making art the media of aesthetic education. And by teaching reconciliation, artworks modeled the moral possibility of reconciling warring classes whose endless violence retarded democratic progress. No doubt Schiller theorized aesthetic education in response to the French Revolution's Reign of Terror, for which the moral possibility of a solution was, as he put it, "wanting."

My interpretation of Schiller's *Letters* wants to accord him the justice I believe he has been denied. As I elaborate in *A Democratic Enlightenment*, Schiller should be read as having an advanced understanding of the artwork, one anticipating the reflexive powers later developed by modernist art to call attention to the representational limits of aesthetic forms, thus to art's need to proliferate aesthetic forms to represent artworks' aesthetic objects without the violence of constructing them as other than they are. Multiple aesthetic forms multiply images capturing diverse aspects of artworks' aesthetic objects that artworks leave out.

CW: Your reading of Schiller, then, newly appreciates the significance of his legacy by recognizing his *Letters* for making a decisive contribution to theorizing the possibility of a democratic enlightenment, though you limit the scope of his contribution. You stress the importance of his concept of aesthetic education and its part in teaching the ideal of reconciliation. And you discover him to have a radically precocious sense of the implications of the new arts and art forms created during his time. Here I begin to see you developing his connection to the idea of

a universal art form, which in your final chapter of *A Democratic Enlightenment* you argue the reconciliation image in film may well become. I intend to ask you more about that later. Yet, along with these new theoretical and historical possibilities you locate in Schiller's work, he seems not so forward-looking as to imagine aesthetic education through an art of *moving images* able to teach us how to overcome the construction of difference as otherness.

MS: Your understanding of my argument, Christiane, is entirely on the mark. Schiller, I propose, conceptualizes reconciliation and imagines it being modeled and taught by aesthetic forms, and he privileges the pedagogical role of the visual arts. With Schiller's theory of aesthetic education we are thus delivered to the moment a democratic enlightenment is introduced as a historical possibility. And along with this accomplishment we are startled by his sensitivity to contemporaneous developments of new arts and art forms, which I argue are the forerunners of the idea of a universal art form committed to aesthetic education and the pedagogy of reconciliation. However, he gives us neither the concept nor examples of the reconciliation *image*, and it is the image that is the media for teaching a fledgling democratic people how to overcome its construction of differences as otherness. Not until Whitman's poetry and prose are we introduced to the reconciliation image itself and, moreover, in a way that fully anticipates its appearance in film. And it is not until Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* that we have an evolutionary development of Whitman's first form of the reconciliation image that appears in film. Importantly, both Whitman's and Adorno's reconciliation images presuppose Schiller's achievement.

So to answer your question how the aesthetics of *film* teaches us to overcome the construction of difference as otherness, Christiane, let me turn first to Whitman and then to Adorno. What I will now propose is not only that both consider the reconciliation image to be modeled and taught by the artwork, but that it appears in the artwork as a moving image, hence *already as a kind of film*. For neither Whitman nor Adorno are reconciliation images and their artworks *still* images. All are already in motion. *All are already films*. Thus their reconciliation images can be readily assimilated by cinema.

Turning now to Whitman's reconciliation image brings me to the first of three controversial arguments I develop in *A Democratic Enlightenment*. To start with, I have no doubt your readers, Christiane, will be puzzled by my practice of speaking of Whitman's reconciliation image as a *visual* image! How and why, they may wonder, can I *read* Whitman's poetry as though it transforms the word from something written and read, spoken and heard, into something *seen*? My response is that Whitman writes poetry to create visual images, which is an argument Whitman scholars may well object to. Here's how I defend it.

CW: Before you begin discussing Whitman's contribution to your project of democratic enlightenment, I want to make certain I am clear about his historical relation to Schiller and Adorno. Since Schiller precedes Whitman, who is followed by Adorno, are you arguing that Whitman is a transitional figure in the development of the ideas of democratic enlightenment and its reconciliation image?

MS: That is indeed what I am arguing, though I do not want to be understood as saying that my argument rests on historical evidence of Schiller's influence on Whitman. While Whitman had little knowledge of the German language, he knew enough about German poetry and philosophy for both to influence his own poetry and prose. So readers of Whitman acquainted with Schiller, among other German thinkers, will correctly see their ideas making impressions on his art. I should note that I approach the Schiller-Whitman connection genealogically, but I do not pursue precise genealogical paths taken by a Foucault, rather loose genealogical resemblances of the sort encouraged by Bergson's concept of duration. Accordingly, there are *resemblances* between Schiller and Whitman. For example—both write poetry and prose highlighting the idea of reconciliation; which for both is also modeled and taught by the arts; among which the visual image plays a unique pedagogical role; and both are concerned with the failings of enlightenment, in Schiller's case with the failings of the European Enlightenment, in Whitman's with America's failure to develop an enlightened culture, especially around the idea of reconciliation and the poet's responsibility to enable it to do so. And so on...

Such connections as these draw our attention to Whitman's relation to the visual image, which Schiller likewise privileged. At times in his poetry, and especially in *A Song of the Rolling Earth*, Whitman problematizes the epistemic limits of language. Words cannot deliver knowledge of truth, offer us access to reality, cannot penetrate appearances to ascertain essences thought to lie beneath. With this critique of the limits of language, Whitman intends for poetry to confine our perception to appearances. And what is the natural home for appearances, we must ask, if not visual images! Part of Whitman's genius is his modernist insight into how poetry reflexively calls attention to its own limits. The limits of poetic language valorize appearances, thus valorize vision! And since poetry confines us to visual images of appearances, which deny us knowledge of underlying essences appearances have in common, all appearances appear visually different. Being irreducibly different from one another, appearances to which poetry visually orients us are a diversity of differences, which surround us to form our world. The implications of Whitman writing poetry to create visual images are astonishing. First, because visual images deny us evidence of something true or real or essential underlying appearances, we lack a basis for truth justifying our treating

any difference as Other for its alleged failure to correspond to that truth. Visual images of differences thus resist their construction as the Other, so that no difference can be excluded on the basis of some truth. Such poetry teaches us to be *all-inclusive* of differences. Second, since beneath their appearances differences are essentially unknowable, differences are each unique and mysterious, qualities to which individuals are *receptive.* Finally, individuals *imitate differences* to which they are receptive, becoming different themselves in the images of any of the diversity of differences surrounding them. Whitman's visual images author identity's becoming different in the image of difference as a *democratic becoming.*

So in light of Whitman's poetics on the limits of language, we can identify three dimensions of his ideal of reconciliation—all-inclusiveness, receptivity, and imitation, with the latter two rescuing inclusiveness from the pathologies of the private sphere I discussed earlier. And here we discover Whitman's advance over Schiller. In addition to a concept of reconciliation modeled and taught by poetry's visual images, Whitman gives us the concept and poetry of the reconciliation *image.* Each of the three dimensions of his ideal of reconciliation—all-inclusiveness, receptivity, and imitation—are distinct *images* belonging to his reconciliation image. His reconciliation image appears wherever the all-inclusive, receptivity, and imitative images first appear. In *A Democratic Enlightenment* a chapter documents the appearance of the reconciliation image in Whitman's poetry. At this point, Christiane, I want to recall your question whether Schiller's concept of aesthetic education and its pedagogy of reconciliation help film audiences grasp lessons cinema teaches about overcoming their constructions of difference as otherness. While I answered that Schiller's work did not make progress in that direction, Whitman goes further than him by theorizing an *image* of reconciliation that could circulate through the visual arts, eventually including film. Hence, for Whitman, not only do poetry and prose perform the work of aesthetic education, it is conceivable that his reconciliation image could teach film audiences to overcome their constructions of difference as the Other.

But I must be bolder than this. In order to locate appearances in the pedagogy of the visual image, Whitman not only offers an epistemological argument for emancipating appearances from their indenture to the warn-out Platonic appearance-reality dualism. As Whitman's poem *Eidolons* explains, the *being* of appearances his poetry speaks of are *images* that are *continuously moving*— coming into existence, changing form, and passing on—visual images he intends his verse to imitate, to represent, that is. Here Whitman keeps company with Andre Bazin, who thinks of the being of appearances as images imitated by the moving images of film. By dissolving the ontological distinction between the movement of life and verse, life and film, Whitman and Bazin both think of life and

art as cinema. What this means is that, despite film being years away, through Whitman's shared ontology of the moving image in life and art his ideal of reconciliation *anticipates* film and its image in film. So I want to go further still to say Whitman's shared ontology of being, poetry, and film helps make his verse the moving, cinematic image itself.

Now, once this ontology running through Whitman's verse is brought to light, it is at this point, Christiane, that we are brought to Adorno's image of reconciliation, which I think of as the second evolutionary form of the reconciliation image for the way it incorporates and develops Whitman's.

CW: Before you consider Adorno, I want to ask you a version of the question I put to you about Whitman's work. Your reference to Adorno's *second* evolutionary form of the reconciliation image, which I know you argue is the form found in film, implies that Adorno is the theoretical transition between Whitman and film. But, as is well known, Adorno is not only critical of film for its collusion with mass culture; he is hostile to film for its shameless production and reproduction of sameness—in other words, for its violence toward difference. How do you reconcile your claim that Adorno's reconciliation image is, following Whitman's, the more developed form that appears in film, with Adorno's insistence that film is the enemy of reconciliation?

MS: For precisely the reason you indicate, Christiane, your question challenges the second of the three most controversial claims in my book, the first being that Whitman writes poetry to create visual images. How can Adorno's critique of film be reconciled with my argument that the most advanced form of the reconciliation image, which he discovers in modern art, can later be found in film? If it is also to appear in film, I have to show that the reconciliation image Adorno finds in modern art is visual and in motion, as I hope to have shown is Whitman's reconciliation image.

For Adorno, images of reconciliation become the exclusive province of modernist art, which he thought was the last refuge for the reconciliation image owing to an aesthetic form of reason ultimately confined to modern art alone. Against this claim, I *think with Adorno against Adorno.* By studying how Adorno theorized modernism's aesthetic forms to explain why its artworks create images of reconciliation, I could ask if the aesthetics of those forms were also to be found in film. If we found modern art and film sharing an aesthetic form, then by way of Adorno's aesthetic modernism we might discover film to be as productive of the reconciliation image as modern art. So you see I attempt to *theorize with Adorno* to flesh out what it is about modern art that encourages him to maintain it became the final refuge for images of reconciliation, while I theorize *against Adorno* by embracing that selfsame telltale aesthetic theory to find the reconciliation image in film.

I can now report, Christiane, what is of greatest fascination to me. The motion Whitman attributes to art and in his poetry is productive of a reconciliation image that anticipates cinema, is as central to Adorno's aesthetic theory *despite* his critique of film, which he insists contributes to the culture industry's creation of a society whose rationality is hostile to difference and to reconciliation as he and Whitman theorize it. It is astonishing there has been no attention to speak of to Adorno's proposition that "art can be understood only by its laws of movement," as its importance to his *Aesthetic Theory* cannot be overstated. Elements of modern art's aesthetic forms, he maintains, throw the artwork into motion to create its reconciliation image, the artwork's aesthetic claim to reason and critique. Artworks producing the reconciliation image are *always* in motion. They appear, as do paintings, as still images only because we fail to experience them aesthetically, which requires a unique kind of gaze. By adopting that gaze we perceive the artwork to be in motion. Experienced aesthetically, still images become moving images that revise the artwork's original appearance, its aesthetic identity, which becomes different in the images of the ways its aesthetic object is and could become different from its original image. Artworks teach reconciliation as aesthetic identity's imitation of its aesthetic object, *thus as identity imitating difference*, an aesthetic motion of imitation each of us must perform to be reconciled with differences surrounding us.

In *A Democratic Enlightenment* I clarify this mimetic process of the reconciliation image and thus of reconciliation. In its middle chapters, I flesh out Adorno's theory of how modern artworks produce and model the reconciliation image. By adopting the gaze he recommends to inaugurate my aesthetic experience, I view paintings by Monet of the Rouen Cathedral and a Rodin sculpture entitled *Thought*, after which I document my experience with an analytical account. My aesthetic experience of both artists' artworks was revelatory, and bore testimony to Adorno's theory of how modern artworks produce the reconciliation image to model and teach reconciliation as mimetic movement.

Let me review my aesthetic experience of Rodin's *Thought*. As long as I allowed my gaze to remain immersed in his sculpture, it fastened on a movement by its original image whereby its aesthetic identity began and then continued to change, to become different by including differences belonging to its aesthetic object the artwork's original image had left out. Although his sculpture's original image is of a woman's head atop a large block of stone, by occupying the place where the body ought to be the block of stone invited me to imagine a second image bringing the missing body into "view;" this new image next coaxed me to imagine the image of a mind and body reunited, which was a third image inviting me to imagine multiple images of what the marriage of mind and body could do.

So as I experienced Rodin's sculpture aesthetically, its aesthetic form appeared to forge a mimetic alliance between its aesthetic identity (its original image), and differences belonging to its aesthetic object the original image excluded. New images were serially produced by the imitation of differences, so that the imitation of what had been omitted by the original image of the artwork continually revised its aesthetic identity. Hence the mimetic movement of Rodin's sculpture was the reconciliation of identity and difference. Importantly, differences with which identity can be reconciled are infinite, just as the different images produced by the marriage of a mind and body are potentially infinite. While every new image of a mind-body relation is an *instance* of reconciliation, ever-new images that aesthetic movement *could produce* means there are inexhaustible differences to be reconciled with. Reconciliation is always a time-arrived and a time yet to come.

Through my aesthetic experience of Rodin's *Thought* I was able to distinguish a collection of images the artwork produced and passed through. *Thought's* aesthetic *identity*, its original image, was *receptive* to *difference*, its receptivity first revising the original image to include the image of the body, then revising it again to form the image of the mind-body reunited, which urged us to imagine a series of images of an indefinite number *all-inclusive* of differences—the image of the mind-body engaged in any and all conjugally creative actions their union is capable of. Finally, each of these revisions of the artwork's aesthetic identity entailed mimetic movement, the *imitation* of difference. So—in motion—Rodin's sculpture creates the reconciliation image by passing through the *identity, receptivity, difference, all-inclusive, and imitative images*. Through our aesthetic experience we visualize the motion of the reconciliation image allowing us to reconstruct its five constituent images. After Whitman's first evolutionary form of the reconciliation image, which he limited to the receptivity, all-inclusive, and imitative images, Adorno gives us a second evolutionary form. Adorno's is the reconciliation image that appears, already in motion, in film. Adorno's reconciliation image marks "the birth of the new image," as Deleuze brilliantly theorizes that event in *Cinema I*.

CW: Considering our discussion of the issues I have raised to this point, it seems to me that Hegel may be no less important than Schiller, Whitman, and Adorno, with regard to certain features of the concept of reconciliation you theorize. From a Hegelian vantage point, we might ask, would you include cinema among art forms capable of expressing values affirming that subjectivity's exteriorization, as in its endless struggles with others for recognition when constituting its identity in the most fundamental ways, can be overcome? Certainly, Hegel thought of poetry as such an art form of expression.

MS: You are certainly correct to insist we not limit our conversation about the ideal of reconciliation and its pedagogical image to the artists-philosophers I have foregrounded, and that Hegel could make an important contribution to it. If we allowed ourselves, it would be easy to submit to the temptation to decipher how the reconciliation image in film both illuminates and is illuminated by the experiences of consciousness and the history of reason in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Perhaps no other work in the history of philosophy could better put such an aesthetic invention as the reconciliation image to the test whose importance you underscore. Not afforded that time, perhaps we can at least begin to answer such questions as yours. Here is one way. One of the *Phenomenology's* penultimate sections of Hegel's reflections on absolute knowledge may be of assistance, where mind uniquely aware of its limitations achieves rational self-understanding, which is a consciousness and self-recognition of mind's role and mind's forms in human history and, eventually, in the universe. Here I am thinking of Hegel's discussion of art.

Though I cannot now adequately defend my argument in Hegel's terms, I would be inclined to argue that the concept of reconciliation in *A Democratic Enlightenment* qualifies as a Hegelian "Idea" that appears in a sensible form—the artwork—as an "Ideal," just as, for an example, the Idea of difference as democracy's highest spiritual value appears as an Ideal in the reconciliation image. As the sensible form of the Idea of reconciliation, the Ideal the reconciliation image in film represents is the emancipation of difference from its construction as the Other through a mimetic transformation of identity becoming different in the image of difference. As the Ideal expressing an Idea of reconciliation, the reconciliation image in film represents the transformation—"subjectivity's overcoming its exteriorization"—of identities belonging to individuals, groups, communities, nations, genders, races, and sexualities, among other differences.

Once further developed, through its preservation of the *ineffable* nature of the spiritualized Idea Hegel would insist upon, this formulation of the reconciliation image in film would allow me to deny its mimetic (copy-like) character, yet at the same time to stress the work of mimesis in the reconciliation image's Ideal representation of the Idea. This is because both Whitman's and Adorno's concept of reconciliation as a time arrived and a time yet to come imbues its image with the capacity to represent *instances* of reconciliation, thus to *envision* reconciliation, yet also to testify to the *absence* of reconciliation, that is, to testify to reconciliation *as an ineffable achievement that can never be completely represented*. Thought of in Hegel's—and Whitman's and Adorno's—terms, art would allow us to think of the reconciliation image in film as able to preserve the spiritual Idea of a democracy of differences, thus as a consciousness of the Absolute, and as the sensible form in which the Absolute can appear as a democratic Ideal.

CW: In light of this argument, it seems to me that for our own time such a capacious art as you describe could not be just any movie. Rather, it would include only such films as are grounded in the necessity of Hegel's Absolute that could move subjectivity toward ever-higher stages of consciousness. And such films as those, in which the reconciliation image, aesthetic education, and democratic enlightenment appear, could only be possible in societies whose understanding of democracy viewed it as an idea never fully realized, but always in the process of realization. Do you agree?

MS: I think your point is both perfectly correct and quite fascinating. It would mean democracy would had to have progressed to a certain level for the Idea of reconciliation to appear as an Ideal in the sensible form of the reconciliation image in film. *And*, it would mean, too, that no matter how democratic, no society could ever be satisfied with its achievements. Its film would always reflexively call attention to the limitations of its achieved level of reconciliation by recognizing differences identities construct as the Other and are always yet to be reconciled with.

CW: Pursuing this Hegelian line of thinking brings me to three final questions that in different ways all have to do with a single issue. Does the reconciliation image represent democratic values benefitting global concerns as well as those of western democratic societies, or only such values as are important to the modern democratic world?

Your reading of Schiller's philosophy of aesthetic education, Whitman's aesthetics of prose and poetry, and Adorno's aesthetic theory of modern art offer us a unique understanding of how a democratic enlightenment can be achieved through cinema in the context of western—especially North American—democracies. Let me ask this, then: As dominant identities defining societal norms are increasingly reconciled with differences, however, wouldn't the goal of aesthetic education, its ideal of reconciliation, prove to be just a type of utopian democratic state? Wouldn't it limit aesthetic education to a critique of current western democratic milieus' need to create the possibility of, say, "democratic good will"? Or would it imagine a project for a qualitatively better society throughout the West but also beyond it, liberating us all from the West's most serious mistakes?

MS: As I have formulated the arguments of *A Democratic Enlightenment*, it may seem that my approach to this question reflects the limitations you stress. The ideal of reconciliation I develop values difference above all, which at present does have parochial overtones. It is a democratic value authored by democratic societies that are almost exclusively western. And such parochialism is not tempered by arguing that difference is not only the most democratic but also the most human of all values. Except for those in western democracies hostile to it, all too often such humanism, by being bound up with difference, appears to be a

western conceit. Moreover, once the parochialism of difference as a democratic-human value is conceded, reconciliation's other values appear parochially democratic, too. For example, the idea of identity in any of its forms becoming different in the image of difference; thus the all-inclusiveness of differences, which models the multiple ways individual and collective identity can imitate differences to become different itself; identity's receptivity to difference, which values difference as identity's potential *doppelganger*; and so on. Each of these and other values assumed by the ideal of reconciliation is democratic through and through. And if the ideal is parochial, then the media of delivering it—film—is no less so, despite its universality.

So you are right, Christiane, this line of questioning returns us to the Hegelian line of thought you began. The Idea of difference, and the Idea of democracy it belongs to, are narrow spiritualizations of the Absolute whose sensible form parades as the reconciliation image to appear as an Ideal. Here, true universality requires a self-reflective reason recognizing art's rational content as prelude to a synthesis of subjective and objective spirit, to identity becoming different as the reconciliation between West and non-West. Yet there is another way to think of the ideal of reconciliation as a global value. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* closing essay, "Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment," Adorno and Horkheimer declare that with the achievement of reconciliation "the Jewish Question would indeed prove the turning-point of history." It was because Jews represented the most extreme form of difference, the "negative principle as such," as they wrote, that reconciliation ending violence toward Jews likewise signified that *all other forms of difference, too,* would no longer be victims of violence toward difference. With this closing declaration they recall the opening argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which traced the practice of constructing difference as the Other to reason itself, as though reason, by its very nature, was pathological. It was reason's formalistic, instrumental side that compelled its violence toward difference. However, as they also argued in that work, though less clearly than Adorno later did in *Aesthetic Theory*, reason's second, aesthetic side was not only capable of opening reason to the possibility of ending such violence. To achieve reconciliation, driven by its aesthetic side reason could subdue its instrumental drives—though only if the long process of enlightenment from Homeric Greece to the present had not first deaestheticized reason.

Now this pathology of reason—and this is decisive—which for Adorno and Horkheimer begins with the birth of thinking itself, takes *nature* as the first form of difference towards which reason displays the violence of constructing difference as otherness. Reason's construction of difference as the Other is expressed in its determination to master nature, to construct nature as the infinitely pliable servant of human needs, precisely the orientation toward nature that in our own time is responsible for global climate change. This entire genealogy of reason, which I believe in many if not most respects to be valid, returns us to why modern art is

so important for Adorno. By modeling reconciliation as the work of aesthetic reason, art also models an aesthetic relation to nature able to subdue the violence of instrumental reason responsible for climate change. Against this background of reason's history of dominating nature and its contribution to our climate crisis, then, as an aesthetic achievement reconciliation expresses the highest of all *global* human values—saving the very life of our planet.

CW: I want to continue to press you on this. It seems to me this question of whether a theory of democratic enlightenment can transcend a critique limited to democratic good will in order to envision a qualitatively better society is tied to a second question. How does movement occur from the theory of democratic enlightenment to the politics of democratic enlightenment, and should a consideration of this issue of praxis begin with a discussion of the political public sphere? After all, we have the historical connection between the European Enlightenment and the republican ideals of the French and American revolutions, their defense of free speech and a free press, and influential arts and literature circulating through a variety of communications media that led to the emergence of public spaces and public spheres. Is not our contemporary condition, with its advanced communications processes, especially well-equipped to originate a diversity of public spaces around distinct images of difference that could develop into a public sphere whose deliberations focus on the reconciliation of identities and differences?

That is the evolution of the communications process that I understand you to be saying arises from the continual appearance of new social differences in a democratic society. That process would interrogate truths that enable dominant identities to construct difference as otherness. If I understand you correctly, the theoretical path you have taken, from Schiller to Whitman through Adorno to cinema, will culminate in a democratic enlightenment whose forum would be public spaces, and perhaps ultimately, a public sphere, whose discourses and politics would be dedicated to rescuing difference from its construction as the Other. Isn't this the practical, political thrust of your work?

MS: As the question our discussion should eventually lead to, the one concerning praxis you now raise is the most important while also uniquely complicated. At present, proliferating social media sites may mark the earliest stages of a democratic enlightenment whose natural political forums would be future public spheres discursively revolving around such aesthetic-political practices as those theorized by the ideal of reconciliation and represented by the reconciliation image; namely, an affirmation of identity that does not avowal its truth; identity's all-inclusiveness of and receptivity to differences; identity's imitation of differences to become different in the images of difference; and, finally, identity's recognition there are always new differences yet to come, so that its every imitation of difference is an instance of reconciliation that is a time arrived and also a prelude to reconciliation at a time yet to come.

In America, however, at present social media's relation to difference is also divided between sites oriented to some idea of reconciliation and sites committed to intensifications of the violence of constructing differences as the Other. This is to say that social media as a whole has made little progress beyond the current political landscape's divisiveness. But although there are no discussions to speak of between the two types of social media sites, within the former there are public spaces devoted to discussions of a range of social differences, including persons of color, gender, class, sexual orientation, Jews, Muslims, immigrants and refugees, among other differences. Here we can find communicative interactions within constellations of public spaces whose members are eager to problematize truth claims enjoyed by differences at each other's expense. Moreover, many of these public spaces are sites of aesthetic discourses on difference and our relations to difference and prominently include cinema, whose images encourage discursive interactions among media sites. Can we not then imagine such public spaces collectively forming an incipient public sphere? Undoubtedly!

To be sure, such an evolution of public spaces into a public sphere is the political precondition for an enlightened democratic society able to achieve the idea of reconciliation envisioned by the reconciliation image in film. The first major step toward such an evolution is for the plurality of public spaces devoted to discourses of difference to develop modes of communicative interaction. And in this regard, it is apparent their shared discursive interest in cinema already qualifies as a proto-public sphere. Film's reconciliation image could facilitate such an evolution of public spaces by refining their shared interest in a *cinema* of difference to cinema's *image* of difference.

CW: For a final, two-part question, in *A Democratic Enlightenment* you devote considerable explanation to how film aesthetically educates viewers to identify the reconciliation image and to understand its meaning as well as social, political, and cultural purposes. In your final chapters you do this through analyses of two films, *The Help* (2011) and *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), that depict violence toward racial and ethnic differences. You show how each film aesthetically educates viewers through the reconciliation image, which teaches how the violence of constructing difference as otherness can be overcome. You also mention other films containing reconciliation images that teach lessons about overcoming various constructions of differences as otherness, notably, *Pride*, *Tootsie*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Forrest Gump*, *My Left Foot*, and *The Soloist*, which were all great international successes. Should we not ask if there might be a problem with aesthetic education offered by such films owing to the significant influence of North American culture on Hollywood cinema? Along these lines, would you also address the matter of "the reconciliation image versus the narrative structure of film," so we can better understand the relationship between image and narrative when we view movies to discover if they are media for the aesthetics and politics of reconciliation?

MS: Christiane, your question correctly recognizes that these two theoretical issues, the second of which is the third most controversial argument in my book, cannot be separated. So I want to answer by showing how these two issues are inseparably connected and why I consider the second to be so controversial.

At the outset, we must distinguish between the aesthetic form and content of film. As I theorize the reconciliation image, its aesthetic form determines our interest in film, for the aesthetic form of the reconciliation image is common to all films teaching the ideal of reconciliation and engaged in the enlightenment process of aesthetic education. If our interest, then, is whether we can discover the reconciliation image in a film, this requires we search for the images of which the reconciliation image consists and the elements associated with each image. Finding its constituent images and aesthetic elements offers the high likelihood films in which they appear produce the reconciliation image.

Now, whereas all films productive of the reconciliation image share its aesthetic form—its constituent images and elements—the aesthetic content of such films varies across a growing collection of genres concerned with particular social differences constructed as Others. Moreover, just as film content regarding genres of difference and otherness vary across films teaching reconciliation, film narratives for each genre vary to a greater extent. How many stories are there and will there be about women, gays, persons of color, Jews, Muslims, immigrants, refugees, and all such differences constructed as societal Others? The horror of this question leads us to how the distinction between aesthetic form and content allows us to understand how the influence of North American culture on Hollywood films where reconciliation images appear is transcended. Let me offer an example of how this distinction between aesthetic form and content functions. Of the five images the reconciliation image consists of, its "imitative image" is the most important for how it registers the transformation of identity into difference; registers the moment an identity responsible for or implicated in the construction of difference as otherness becomes different itself in the image of the difference it had subjected to marginalization, discrimination, exclusion, and even extermination; for how it registers *reconciliation*.

So, in *The Help*, a white couple invites their black maid to dinner and waits upon her as black maids for centuries have waited upon whites. Imitating their maid, the couple achieves with her a shared understanding of racial servitude as white identity becomes black in the image of difference. In *Gentleman's Agreement* a Christian painfully learns of and then overcomes her tacit antisemitism by arranging for a Jewish family to settle in her antisemitic suburb, her individual identity thus becoming different through an imitation of Jews whose struggle for a home she makes her own. In *Pride* heterosexual male union workers hostile to gays later dance with them, by their imitative act of men dancing with men forming a more complex picture of gays and of themselves struggling for recognition. In

Dirty Dancing, dancing is again the imitative means of identity's transformation, in this case of wealthy metropolitan Jews who looked down upon the working-class spa-resort staff Other, whose dance lessons taught their affluent Jewish student patrons their art of becoming open to uninhibited self-expression. In *Tootsie* an actor pretending to be an actress to earn a part in a sitcom reveals that through the female role he imitated he became a better man as a woman than he was as a man. And so on...

I could discuss any of the films your question noted, along with countless other Hollywood and foreign films, to show how the imitative image—moreover all the images forming the reconciliation image—represents a limitless variable content of social differences whose constructions as the Other are overcome to realize the democratic ideal of reconciliation modeled and taught by the reconciliation image. What we should conclude from this is that where the aesthetic content of films about the constructions of difference as Other is influenced by North American or other cultures, the biases of those contexts are transcended by the aesthetic form of the reconciliation image. Whether a film is produced in Hollywood or Bollywood, when the aesthetic form of the reconciliation image appears in a film, the *real* narrative of the film is the ideal of reconciliation, which neutralizes the influence of culture on the democratic lesson taught. By reason of its aesthetic form, the reconciliation image becomes a universal art form! This brings me directly to your question's second issue, which I have referred to as the third most controversial argument in *A Democratic Enlightenment*; namely, the reconciliation image vs. the narrative structure of film. There are two theoretical dimensions to this issue, the why and the how. Why should we be alert to a possible conflict between the appearance of the reconciliation image in a film and a film's narrative structure? And how do we theorize the appearance of an image in a film running contrary to its narrative, whose images unfold to tell a story contrary to a story of reconciliation? I will briefly answer the first query, but I expand on the complicated second question in *A Democratic Enlightenment's* "Second Bridge."

Regarding the why, among those many films investigating the construction of social difference as otherness, there are few whose *narratives* tell stories of reconciliation. Most of these (former) films' narratives are narrowly focused on analyses of conditions under which differences as the Other are forced to live. And, too, many such film narratives are simply hostile to the idea of reconciling identities and differences. However, in many films home to such narratives, such as those I just described, the reconciliation image nevertheless can be discovered. Paradoxically, then, once discovered, in such films the reconciliation *image* contradicts and is opposed to the original *narrative structure* that gave it birth.

CW: May we conclude by hearing a little about your new work?

MS: By all means! Quite ambitiously, some years ago I planned three works that were to explore problems in politics and aesthetics I had long been struggling with. The first to be published, *Reason and Horror: Critical Theory, Democracy, and Aesthetic Individuality*, took up the question of the possibilities available to members of modern democratic societies to create and recreate themselves, essentially to treat their identities as works of art whose aesthetic forms not only allowed, but also encouraged the reconstitution of identities in any and all of their individual and collective, private and public, personal and political dimensions. Its central concern was to ameliorate the violence to self and others inherent in the construction of modern identity. That work marked my first intensive study of the thought of Whitman and Adorno, Tocqueville and Nietzsche, and assembled a theoretical montage whose interconnections and continuities were also fleshed out with the help of Kant and Hegel, J.S. Mill and Habermas, Schubert and Schoenberg, Wagner and Monet, among others.

A Democratic Enlightenment: *The Reconciliation Image, Aesthetic Education, Possible Politics* is the second of my three planned works to appear. It marks the final stage of my work on Whitman and Adorno and I also expand its theoretical montage to include Diderot, Voltaire, and Schiller, Bergson and Deleuze, Lyotard, Roland Barthes, Bazin, Spivak and Massumi, with painting and sculpture, especially Rodin, and of course film providing the pedagogical arts of reconciliation. Its central concern is again, as I have explained, the aesthetics of identity, which now however focus on how art, the aesthetics of the visual image in film, offers an education on how identity in its broadest configurations could be more or less recreated in the very images of those differences it had, with rarely a second thought, constructed as its Other over the long course of its non-violent as well as violent history.
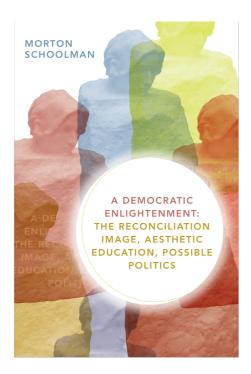
Recently I've begun the third and final act of this long play, about which I will say only a little. As did the first two books of my planned trilogy, the third, entitled *Beyond Identity: From the One to the Many*, continues to pursue the aesthetics of modern identity, although this work departs from my earlier theoretical emphases. Whereas the earlier books focused initially on the aesthetics of identity and then on cinema's pedagogy of teaching reconciliation as identity's mimetic relation to difference, as identity's imitation of differences it constructed as its Other, that is, despite the importance that both works assigned to the figural they also presupposed a rational epicenter, a command center belonging to individual identity responsible for its pluralization in the images of difference. While my third book retains this emphasis on identity's mimetic relation to difference, *Beyond Identity* will go on to argue for the *decentering* of reason in the mimetic work identity performs, will argue for reason's *coequal* relationship with the multiple voices of which identity is newly composed by recreating itself through its imitation of differences. This new work will reflect the influence on my thinking of Homeric scholarship arguing that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* offer a model of identity composed of multiple voices in dialogue with one another, a dialogue that is often

internally agonistic and whose voices or alliances of voices are not subordinate to the voice of reason. This Homeric model of identity is precisely the model Plato opposed in the interest of achieving and preserving the unity of the One, of the soul, of the city, which is the Platonic alternative model to Homer's that dominated the western cultural and political imagination through Descartes' consolidation of its rationalistic structure.

Beyond Identity will argue that the Platonic-Cartesian model of identity is coming undone and becoming increasingly obsolete in the modern world, which is gradually returning to the Homeric model of identity supplanted in classical Greece. We see evidence of this reversal in the development of modern art, in the radical transformations occurring in individual identity, and also in the birth of early modern democracy and the range of national, international, and global democratic institutions that have emerged since. Our planetary future may depend on the flourishing of this Homeric model's decentering of the voice of reason and its multiplication of coequal voices, whose differences find their platforms in the virtual networks and the public spaces and public spheres they create that your own work, Christiane, finds so important.

Christiane, I want to thank you again for this opportunity to discuss my work. I hope your readers find it as interesting as I have found your contributions to my own thinking.

Christiane Wagner, Editor-in-Chief, chris@artstyle.international
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Morton Schoolman's teaching and research fields are modern political and social theory, including American political thought, with a particular interest within these fields in the relation among politics, aesthetics, art and film. He is author of *A Democratic Enlightenment: The Reconciliation Image, Aesthetic Education, Possible Politics*, published by Duke University Press, 2020.

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