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WORKSHOP REPORT “Schelling and the Frankfurt School” Frankfurt am Main, June 16-17, 2025

Alexander Legebeke

Summary

This report offers a summary and critical reflections on the two-day workshop “Schelling and the Frankfurt School,” held in Frankfurt on June 16–17, 2025, and co-organized by Martin Saar, Kyla Bruff, and Tobias Heinze. Five presentations explored intersections between Schelling’s philosophy and key figures of the Frankfurt School, followed by a panel discussion and two reading workshops on Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*¹ and Schelling’s Freedom Essay.² Across sessions, participants explored questions of aesthetics, ecology, materialism, psychoanalysis, social philosophy, and freedom, revealing both convergences and divergences that point toward new research directions.

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966). English translation: Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

² F. W. J. Schelling, “Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände,” in *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling, I/7 (Stuttgart/Augsburg: Cotta, 1856–61). English translation: F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006).

Introduction

The workshop aimed to reassess the philosophical affinities between Schelling and Frankfurt School thinkers, in light of contemporary ecological crises and renewed interest in the philosophy of nature. Throughout the workshop, participants explored how Schelling's dynamic account of nature and his notion of the unconscious inform Critical Theory's commitments to negative dialectics, social mediation, and material analysis. Over the course of two days, presentations alternated with open debate, culminating in a panel and discussions that assessed the promises and challenges of a Schelling-inspired critical philosophy.

1. Sean McGrath: *Marcuse's Critique of the Neo-Freudians and The Schellingian Unconscious*

McGrath began by tracing the three commitments that unite Marcuse and Schelling: the rooting of reason in non-rational drives, the contingency of structural injustice, and an eschatological hope for communal transformation. Nonetheless, McGrath argued that Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*³ overextends its premises, namely, that civilization is repressive and assumes a realizable classless society, a position that Schelling would contest. Furthermore, he identified three Schellingian models of the unconscious, i.e., *naturphilosophische*, tripartite-personal, and collective-mythological, and showed how each model deepens pessimism about human self-fulfillment without an "other-power." He concluded by proposing a Schelling-inspired political philosophy of "productive dissociation," which preserves Marcuse's transformative hope while reasserting the necessity of "grace" over self-emancipation.

2. Philipp Höfele: *How to React to the Ecological Crisis? An Attempt to Respond with Schelling and Adorno*

Höfele revived the classical call to "follow nature (*naturam sequi*)," demonstrating how Schelling's and Adorno's aesthetic theories ground an ecological ethics that neither reduces nature to resource nor dissolves it into social mediation. Drawing on Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800),⁴

³ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955). German translation: Herbert Marcuse, *Triebstruktur und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1957).

⁴ F. W. J. Schelling, "System des transzendentalen Idealismus," in *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling, I/3 (Stuttgart/Augsburg: Cotta, 1856–61). English translation: F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978).



On the Relation of the Plastic Arts to Nature (1807),⁵ and the first draft of the *Ages of the World* (1811),⁶ he presented “living imitation” and “absolute abstraction” as parallel moments in nature’s self-expression, which art reveals. He connected these to Adorno’s concept of mimesis and the primacy of the object, showing how art both affirms nature’s alterity and enacts a unity that emphasizes ecological responsibility. In a Schellingian manner, Höfele sketched an ecological attitude that holds social critique and natural wonder in dynamic tension.

3. Camilla Flodin: *Adorno’s Aesthetics of Nature and Schelling’s Naturphilosophie*

Flodin, who delivered her presentation online, argued that Adorno’s aesthetic project is best understood as an “aesthetics of nature,” where art mediates nature’s irreducible “more.” Flodin drew parallels between Schelling’s view of art as revealing the joint productivity of unconscious nature and human intention, and Adorno’s insistence on art’s immediacy preserving nature’s alterity. Furthermore, Flodin proposed that both thinkers attend to the momentary perfection of living forms, which art lifts beyond temporality into an appearance that endures. Central to the form’s convergence is the idea of “reciprocal receptivity,” a stance in which the subject remains open to the non-identical object, resulting in a particular kind of mimesis.

4. Tobias Heinze and Kyla Bruff: *Constellating Nature? Horkheimer’s Interdisciplinary Materialism, Adorno’s Objection, and the Natural Sciences and Schelling, Naturphilosophie, and the late turn to Materialism*

In their paper presentations and subsequent dialogue, Heinze and Bruff explored the question of a materialist *Naturphilosophie* that addresses scientific complexity and social justice. Heinze defended Horkheimer’s interdisciplinary materialism, characterized by its oscillation between social theory and empirical research, as crucial for confronting climate injustice. He countered objections about empiricism, theoretical overload, and aestheticization by underscoring Adorno’s concept of negative totality. Bruff traced Schelling’s materialist evolution from early organicism through the *Freedom Essay*’s account

⁵ F. W. J. Schelling, “Über das Verhältnis der bildenden Künste zur Natur,” in *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling, I/7 (Stuttgart/Augsburg: Cotta, 1856–61). English translation: F. W. J. Schelling, “On the Relationship of the Plastic Arts to Nature,” trans. Jason M. Wirth, *Kabiri: The Official Journal of the North American Schelling Society* Vol. 3 (2021): 132–158.

⁶ F. W. J. Schelling, *Die Weltalter: Fragmente. In den Urfassungen von 1811 und 1813*, ed. Manfred Schröter (Munich: Biederstein, 1946). English translation: F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World* (1811), trans. Joseph P. Lawrence (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019).

of ground and existence, to his late positive philosophy, in which matter recognizes the contingencies of reason, thereby ensuring that reason will never be subjugated to a closed, totalizing system. Bruff argued that the latter philosophy “places Schelling in unexpected proximity to Adorno and the Frankfurt School.” Furthermore, Heinze and Bruff suggested a variety of conceptual keys that might illuminate climate injustice.

5. Panel Discussion: *Schelling and the Frankfurt School: Challenges and Promises*

Moderated by Bruff and Heinze, the panel addressed three central challenges: the chronological distance between Schelling and Critical Theory, the conceptual tension of idealist *Naturphilosophie* versus dialectical materialism, and the divergent political stakes. Martin Saar urged caution regarding “metaphysical baggage” while acknowledging the inheritance of Schelling’s philosophy by (post-)Habermasian Critical Theory. Höfele proposed a methodological synthesis between Schelling and Adorno for inventive ecological thought, while McGrath emphasized speculative philosophy as a never-ending inquiry that counters metaphysical closure and ideology-bound critique. Because, as McGrath enchantingly expressed, stopping our questioning through speculative philosophy would amount to the “suicide of reason.” Finally, Flodin’s online contribution emphasized the relationship between Schelling’s and Adorno’s aesthetic theories.

6. Reading Workshops: Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* and Schelling’s *Freedom Essay*

On the second day, two reading sessions explored Adorno’s metacritique of Kantian practical reason and Schelling’s account of the “indivisible remainder,” with a focus on the two thinkers’ respective accounts of freedom. Debates focused on whether Adorno’s critique of idealism is reconcilable with Schelling’s “indivisible remainder,” and if Critical Theory’s historicism can accommodate Schelling’s metaphysical account of moral agency. Though consensus remained elusive, discussions affirmed that Schelling’s account of the “indivisible remainder” offers a provocative challenge to social-historical reductionism and enriches the Frankfurt School’s conception of autonomy.

Conclusion

The workshop revealed rich affinities and productive tensions between Schelling’s evolving philosophy and the Frankfurt School’s critical legacy. Speakers and participants demonstrated that Schelling’s speculative



philosophy and Adorno's negative dialectics can engage in a productive conversation, each informing the other's strengths and exposing the limits of each. Future research might develop new frameworks for ecophilosophy, explore the political implications in Schelling's late thought, and investigate analyses of power, including in an ontological key, in critical praxis. The dialogues in Frankfurt have paved the way for sustained inquiry at the intersection of speculative philosophy and urgent contemporary challenges, as well as for future collaborative projects that build on these dialogues.