Artikel voor 'de HTV'

# "Man is actually *chaos*"

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## Introduction

"Man is actually *chaos*."
Novalis

"A good confusion has more value than a bad order."
Ludwig Tieck

To deal with contemporary experiences of chaos, diversity and cultural incomprehensibility, some form of postmodernism or post-structuralism is often considered to offer the best chance to arrive at some form of understanding. The following fragments point instead to a much older philosophical and artistic response to cultural diversity and chaos, namely the poetics of reflexivity that was developed before the year 1800 by the Early German Romantics. Of course, this group of poets, writers, theorists and philosophers (Novalis, the brothers Friedrich Schlegel and August Wilhelm Schlegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ludwig Tieck, Wilhelm Wackenroder) made their work before the inventions of photography, the shopping mall, the cinema, the internet, global cultural exchange, and so on; in some respects, it can only seem to be outdated. On the other hand, they responded immediately to the French Revolution, with its promises of religious and civil freedom, and to the Enlightenment, with its promise of scientific explanations for everything under the sun. Their response to these unprecedented events was a demand for complete artistic freedom. And what is more, their experimental proposals for dealing with that freedom appear to be as fresh and relevant today as they were over two centuries ago. In many interesting respects, such as their insistence on irony, chaos and incomprehensibility as formative elements of art, the Early Romantics may be seen as the predecessors of the avant-gardes of the first decades of the twentieth century. Now that the work of those avant-gardes has become classical, contemporary artists may wish to look beyond them, to older impulses and reflections.

The following fragments have been selected from the recently published book *"We Are The Noise Between Stations": a philosophical exploration of the work of David Byrne, at the crossroads of popular media, conceptual art, and performance theatre*; Maastricht: Mixed Media, 2003. (www.mixed-media.info/noise/)

## The reflexive potential of early Romanticism

The early Romantic literary and philosophical theory of Germany, also known as Jena Romanticism, originated in the short period from 1795 to 1801. Since then, its reputation has wavered. For the longest time, early Romanticism was either neglected or thrown together with Romanticism in general; it was but rarely seen in

its distinctive qualities. Only in the twentieth century was early Romanticism perceived as an artistically and philosophically distinct undertaking, which anticipated and sometimes inspired avant-gardist attitudes that arose only much later. Walter Benjamin already perceived and elaborated the relevance of early Romanticism in his early works, especially in his 1919 study “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism”, which is dedicated exclusively to early Romanticism—but Benjamin’s work only became widely known after 1970. Also after 1970, more complete editions of the works of the early Romantic school were published, which helped to establish a wider recognition of their distinct position.[1]

The label ‘Romanticism’ is misleading when it is associated with the later Romantic movement in Germany, since that was often characterized by a reactionary attitude, whereas the early Romantics were all in favour of the democratic and cosmopolitan convictions of the French Revolution. Indeed, early Romanticism is so distinct in its theory and practice that is has been remarked that most conventional criticism domesticates their radical insights, and that this is at least in part due to the inability of subsequent artistic movements to sustain the Romantics’ level of theoretical sophistication: “Wide areas of European literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appear as regressive with regards to the truths that come to light in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.”[2] Indeed, compared to early Romanticism, a large part, perhaps even the main part of later artistic and aesthetic endeavours, romantic as well as modernistic, is inadequate and ideological in its straightforward assumptions of total symbolic unity and lacking in self-criticism. In this respect, early Romanticism is not unlike postmodernism; both “seem to assume a twisted posture towards modernism marked by a radical reflection on its conditions”.[3] In early Romanticism, this reflection on the limitations of art and philosophy takes the form of language games, irony and indirect communication, combined with a sharp polemic against aesthetic absolutism.

The early Romantics strove to develop a positive critique that would open up the symbolic artwork from within. They interpreted this as a reflexive development of the symbol, and speculated that this development might provide a deeper insight in the nature of language, the arts, and culture. This reflexive development of artistic truth was to take the form of a universal encyclopaedia, including not only the arts, but equally philosophy, the sciences, and religion, in an infinity of crossovers. This amounts to nothing less than a transformation of philosophy and aesthetics, an “aesthetic turn”, as recent commentators have described the writing of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis:

> These authors are not so much concerned with establishing a poetics, the nature of the beautiful, or its place in systematic philosophy. Rather, they concentrate on the concrete possibilities of *poiesis*, that is, the creation and production of new forms of reflection. It is their express desire to confound, and thus break open, established lines of demarcation between philosophy and art, between science and morality. In their pursuit of an eternal poiesis, they do not so much posit art as the crowning achievement and overcoming of reflexive thought; rather, they regard aesthetics as a merging of the finite and the infinite; they engage in the “gay science” of mixing and relating the most heterogeneous discourses at their proposal.[4]

A good example of this mixing of heterogeneous discourses can be found in a short anonymous text, known as “The Earliest Program of German Idealism” that presents the critical tendencies of early Romanticism as if it had been its manifesto.[5] It proclaims “overthrow of all superstition, persecution of the priesthood that recently

has been feigning reason, through reason itself" and proclaims its conviction that "the highest act of reason is an aesthetic act, in that reason embraces all ideas", to conclude:

> First, I will speak of an idea that, as far as I know, has not yet occurred to anyone—we must have a new mythology, but this mythology must serve ideas, it must become a mythology of *reason.*
>
> Until we make ideas aesthetic, that is, mythological, they are of no interest to the *people* and, conversely, until mythology is reasonable, the philosopher must be ashamed of it. Thus, in the end, enlightened and unenlightened must shake hands, mythology must become philosophical, and the people reasonable, and philosophy must become mythological in order to make the philosophers sensuous.

Because of its practice of combining and mixing heterogeneous art forms and concepts, in combination with its wish to produce a new mythology, early Romanticism may rightly be considered the godfather of the heterogeneous *Gesamtkunstwerk*, of the aesthetic of heterogeneity, complexity and undecidability, for artistic collaboration without forced submission under a master plan that has been pioneered by John Cage.

## Reflexive aesthetics: the matter of subjectivity

The general theme that connects the early Romantics with the philosophers of their period is their wish for a correct description of subjectivity. This description was expected to provide, at one go, the foundation for metaphysical, scientific, political and aesthetic insight. At this focal point, the early Romantics substituted sensibility and style for the almost mathematical chains of reasoning of the philosophy of their age; and they carefully provided reasons for this turnabout.

To grasp the critical potential of this early Romantic turn, it must be compared to the two philosophers who influenced it directly, Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Kant's elaborate and sophisticated version of rationalism underpinned all the innovative developments in German philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century. Fichte's attempt to outdo Kant by providing a new, strictly subjective foundation for philosophy prompted the early Romantics, especially Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, to develop their own vision of philosophy and art as mutually dependent forms of understanding. Their aim was not only to retain the level of critical thinking of these philosophers, but to complete it by adding the artistic dimension that had formerly been left out. As Novalis remarked: "Fichte's and Kant's method has not yet been presented thoroughly and precisely enough. Neither of them knows yet how to experiment with lightness and multiplicity—not at all poetically. Everything is still so stiff, so fearful."[6] This led the early Romantics to bring issues to the foreground that had been neglected by philosophical rationalism: historical experience, individual peculiarities of language, culture, artistic styles, religious experience, the realm of the emotions, and so on. To present this view, Schlegel and Novalis produced a stream of philosophical fragments, studies, essays, poems, novels, as well as literary studies and translations, in collaboration with a circle of friends: historian of literature August Wilhelm Schlegel (Friedrich's brother), theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, and the novelists Tieck and Wackenroder. Their works are tied together loosely by the general outlook of early Romantic thinking, an ongoing series of crossovers between

the subjective and the objective, resulting in the mutual permeating of opposing aspects of experience.

Both Kant and Fichte had provided absolutist accounts of subjectivity, accounts that were in many aspects closely related to the Cartesian version of rationalism, based on the assumption of a purely rational thinking substance, the famous "cogito". Such accounts of rational subjectivity rely exclusively on the identification of consciousness with strict rationality: they purposely refrain from all attempts at psychological veracity. Descartes had even gone so far as to declare that subjectivity is able to work out secure knowledge of everything in nature strictly by itself, without recurrance to observation and experiment. Kant's account of subjectivity was much more self-critical than this solipsistic approach. He set out firm limits to pure rational thinking: by itself, it should only be able to work out the logical categories which allow for an orderly arrangement of all experience of nature. Apart from this pure logical reason, Kantian practical reason was able to produce a fixed and purely formal rule by which to measure all ethical guidelines and laws, the categorical imperative: "Act only on the maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law". But this meant that the Kantian theory of rational subjectivity was divided in itself. In terms of pure logical reason, Kant saw man as fully determined by his nature, while in terms of practical reason, he declared that man is free to live a responsible life. Of course, this paradoxical account of human subjectivity was not quite satisfying to either Kant or his admirers.

At this point, Fichte wanted to improve on Kantian philosophy. Philosophical rationalism has to presuppose a subject that is completely certain of itself, to provide the basis for all its endeavours. But how can a subject be assured of its own subjectivity—the more so if it can not even tell once and for all whether it is divinely free, or determined by its natural properties? If consciousness is to know itself directly, this knowledge has to be based on an immediate form of perception, without the interference of any object: a pure and immediate knowledge for which the term "intellectual intuition" was coined. According to Kant, intellectual intuition can not exist, because pure subjectivity can never be the object of a perception of any kind. Trying to perceive its own subjectivity, the subject finds itself going round in circles.[7] For him, subjectivity remains an evident given, that somehow resists further analysis. But according to Fichte and other philosophical idealists, subjectivity can perceive itself by means of intellectual intuition insofar as it is active. As active, self-consciousness is both subject and object and therefore able to know itself. This idealistic philosophy therefore encourages the active identification of the human subjects with other realities—for example the state, religion, a specific cultural tradition, or even the forces and processes of nature. By means of historical developments, such as political revolutions and the harnessing of the natural powers, all aspects of reality might finally obtain the absolute dignity that Kant had formerly reserved for the rationalistic principle of a universal ethical law.

Of interest here is, that the early Romantics came up with a third solution for the question whether subjectivity can find its foundation within itself. These philosophers—especially Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, but in agreement with Schelling and Hölderlin—concentrated on the pivotal role of aesthetic experience, not as an ornamental and beautifying addition to rational certainty, but as the only self-sufficient basis for a philosophical subjectivity. They concluded that human

consciousness may obtain immediate knowledge of itself, not through the logical knot that Fichte had proposed, but simply in the process of every aesthetic experience. They gladly accepted the implication that this subjectivity could not be absolute, and exchanged that ideal for a vision of subjectivity as floating or hovering everywhere:

> For Novalis, the absolute I is not a positive or clear point of transcendence that serves as an anchor for the subject, as it does in Fichte. Novalis suggests, on the contrary, that the subject does not have transcendent anchors that stabilize it: 'The whole rests somewhat like the players of a game in which people sit in a circle without chairs, one resting upon the other's knee.'[8]

According to the early Romantics, subjectivity is unable to find its fundaments within itself. The absolute identity of subjectivity can not be found within consciousness. (They argued that the very term "intellectual intuition" or "intellectual perception" already proves this, as it differentiates between intellect and perception/intuition.[9]) The foundation of subjectivity is not to be found in an analysis or a self-perception of the thinking self, but beyond it: in a feeling, a spirit or a belief that precedes and accompanies consciousness. Philosophy has to accept this impossibility of the thinking subject to provide itself with an absolute foundation. Art may help to illuminate the origins of subjectivity, but its illumination will always remain an interpretation, and never result in absolute and final knowledge.

Walter Benjamin has summarized this romantic philosophy of the aesthetic by comparing it with the (closely related and influential, yet quite distinct) idealistic philosophies. According to him, romantic philosophy distinguishes itself from idealism by stating that reflexivity does not take place within an "I", a subject that is able to dialectically posit itself, creating itself and its object out of pure thought, but within a medium of thinking: this medium is further identified by Benjamin as language and as art. Romantic reflexivity does not produce its own object, by means of dialectical logic, but only its own form: by means of aesthetic reflection.[10] Reflexivity is therefore a formal characteristic of a work of art, and as such always and in every respect open to critical reflection; nowhere does it claim absolute dignity, originary authenticity or some similar attribute that might be used to raise the work above all criticism.

Logical philosophical concepts are, as Kant already argued, unable to reveal the essence of reality and of human experience. The romantics still insisted on such revelation, but accepted that this could be achieved only indirectly, by using style instead of logical argument. Style may indicate what cannot be explained systematically, by using the indirect means of irony and allegory; philosophy has to turn to poetry to fulfill its purpose. Romanticism has accordingly been defined as "the philosophy which in its speculations abandons the pretension to reach the absolute by reflection, and which supplements this lack by the medium of art".[11] Novalis wrote:

> Through the voluntary renunciation of the absolute, infinite and free activity arises within us. This activity is the only possible absolute that can be given to us and that we find through our inability to reach and recognize an absolute. We can only recognize this given absolute negatively, by acting and finding that we cannot reach what we are searching for through any action.[12]

In philosophical terms, early Romanticism is neither a version of rationalism nor of

absolute idealism, with its dialectic logic that is always able to conclude in a final synthesis, but an aesthetic that is moved by a “negative dialectic”[13]: the insight that consciousness can never know itself absolutely, but only in fragments and flashes, and most clearly in the many mirrors of artworks.

And yet it is a misconception to oppose this aesthetic philosophy to rationalism, since Kantian rationalism remains an important source of inspiration. The Kantian model of subjectivity is a rigorously logical abstraction, disconnected from the real human being with its natural faculties and desires. It is constructed to support scientific knowledge as well as a legal system that underpins a rational society. According to Kant, this exclusively reasonable subject is, in spite of its abstract quality, truly creative, since it is able to shape experience. It is a genuine rationalistic insight that we partly produce phenomena according to the viewpoint we assume; according to Kant, all knowledge contains a poetical element.[14] Kant did very little with this insight: his theory of knowledge concerns itself mainly with mathematics and physics, conceived in mechanistic terms. But the early Romantics gave their full attention to art and history as the comprehensive forms of human experience, and fully developed the poetical element of subjectivity in these areas.

They disapproved of the rationalistic tendency to value scientific knowledge, modelled after mathematics and mechanicistic physics, over all other aspects of reality, and gladly accepted the consequences of this strategy, namely that it is simply impossible to find a fixed form for a model of subjectivity that is fully enjoying all its natural faculties. Novalis and Schlegel agreed that no single aspect of these faculties, nor the combination of all their possible perspectives, is able to provide absolute truth, or a single encompassing standpoint. They embraced the complexity and confusion that are so typical of the aesthetic sensibility, declaring that “a good confusion has more value than a bad order”[15], the more so since order is completed and stable, while confusion may, by means of self-enlightenment, lead to progress and further perfection.[16]

Novalis expressed time and again, in many variations, that it is impossible to fixate subjectivity. “Man is… nothing fixed—He can and should be something determined and undetermined at the same time.” “Everything can be I and is I or should be I”, and: “I is finally nothing.” “*Pluralism* is our most inner being, and perhaps every man contributes a peculiar part to what I am thinking and doing, as likewise I take part in the thoughts of other people.” “Genius is perhaps only the result of such an inner plural.” “Man is actually *chaos*.”[17] Subjectivity, as a part of nature, mixed up in manifold relationships, floating and free, is interpreted as a plurality and a unity at once: “genius” is the term the romantics used to express this.[18] Although the term “genius” first of all emphasizes the harmony between the diverging faculties that together make up a subject, it also implies and acknowledges the dissonance within man. According to the early romantics, the quality of genius is common to every individual, it is presupposed in every form of common sense and not reserved for a few individuals of extraordinary talent. These, Novalis calls “genius of genius”[19], a superlative expression that will be shown to characterize his thinking and writing.

This inner harmony is experienced only through feeling, intuitively. According to Kantian rationalism, for this reason such an intuitive sensibility can not be a part of a theory of knowledge. Kant therefore relegated this aesthetic experience to the sphere of judgments of taste, which according to his philosophy are the result

of a two-layered experience of ourselves: first, a euphony among our faculties, and second, a reflection on that euphony that intensifies the first-level experience and encompasses it.[20] Kant judged this aesthetic experience to be inferior to scientific knowledge. But he also tentatively admitted that the harmonious experience of the beauty of nature, together with its sublime qualities, indicates a possible reconciliation of science and ethics, determinism and freedom. By admitting this, he suggested that this experience deserved a central position in his entire philosophical system. He also emphasized that beauty is not to be enjoyed in isolation, since it presupposes reflection, which in turn presupposes intersubjectivity, the interaction of distinct minds.[21] Because of this, every judgment of taste forms a contribution towards the development of an aesthetic community, based on a developing common sense.[22] Kant even went so far as to assume the idea that a universal voice (that would presumably articulate the harmonious ideas of all mankind) might arise from this.[23]

But for the early Romantics, aesthetic experience is not an afterthought, as it was for Kant, who presented it as a late addition to his systems of scientific and ethical knowledge. For them, it is truly central: they try to ground the unity of mind through aesthetic activity, in which the most disparate elements are brought into contact. Accordingly, they conceive of aesthetic activity as "an endless, necessary process in which meanings are constantly made and remade. According to Novalis, the human imagination as productive fantasy can relate and synthesize the most heterogeneous realms."[24] Kant assumed that scientific knowledge is produced by the subject by the application of a fixed set of logical categories; but Novalis maintains that fiction, illusion and fantasy are the necessary means of all synthesis, that is, of all knowledge.[25]

This synthesis takes place in art. Art is the representation of the inner condition of individual chaotic genius, and as such it is a crucial contribution to rationality, a form of enlightenment. In early Romantic philosophy, the value of poetry (as paradigmatic artform) is unparallelled, because poetry is the regenerative medium, in which the misunderstandings and the self-ignorance of the subject may be realized and dissolved.[26] As such, art is anything but irrational: it is the precondition of rationality. According to Novalis, art is the most substantial reality: "the more poetical, the more true."[27] Subjectivity, as a precondition of all knowledge, is not a fixed given, but a continuously developing condition. Art has the potential to develop subjectivity, to enable it to find itself, to help it recognise itself in the greatest possible diversity of phenomena. Art is not a vacation from the obligations of everyday life, but the opposite: it underpins all scientific and ethical endeavours. This evaluation of art differs so far from more conventional approaches that a few exemplary aspects of it require separate attention.

If every act of knowing implies fiction and poetical activity, it follows that idealism and realism are no longer strictly separate. The harmonious euphony between the faculties of the subject is no longer distinct from the universe—and Novalis has indeed entertained the notion of "universal harmony". This notion functions as a premise that allows Novalis to conceive of the different fields, disciplines, and human faculties as reciprocally illuminating each other.[28] This highly symbolical view of reality does not provide closure; Novalis accepted that it would remain forever incomplete. "The fact that universal harmony is the precondition for Novalis's project does not mean that such a project, culminating in

a “golden age”, can ever be reached. On the contrary, Novalis, very much like Friedrich Schlegel, conceives of the pursuit of his encyclopaedic project and of magic idealism as a never-ending aesthetic activity.”[29]

Novalis and Schlegel used their counterfactual assumption of a harmonious universe to experiment with nearly impossible demands: they often ask of opposites to begin to resemble each other, thus inciting reality to become more harmonious than would seem possible. This procedure is typical of early Romanticism: it is its very core. Examples abound, and some quotations can help to make clear what is at stake here. Schlegel wrote that

> [man and woman should] exchange roles and in childish high spirits compete to see who can mimic the other more convincingly.[30]

Some of Novalis’ remarks on politics closely resemble Schlegel’s ideas about the relation of the sexes:

> There will be a time, and this soon, when people will generally be convinced that no king can subsist without a republic and no republic without a king, that both are like body and soul, and that a king without a republic and a republic without a king are words without significance.[31]

Commenting on Novalis’ politics, Ernst Behler has written that he was “most strongly disposed to the magic words of a revolutionary philosophy of history: the golden age in the past and the corresponding future realm of perfection. Yet, through constant oscillation between these two poles,… he secured himself against either a one-sidedly utopian or a pessimistic philosophy of history and saw the true historical status of the human being as something between the two extremes.”[3233] “What is important in this context is Novalis’ emphasis on interaction, on a reciprocal saturation of two utterly opposed political systems, democracy and monarchy.”[34] Novalis also compared politics to religion:

> The time must come when political entheism [i.e. monotheism] and pantheism are most intimately connected as interactive members.[35]

Opposing Kant, who presented nature and morality as mutually exclusive spheres of reality, Novalis demanded that the two intermingle:

> FORMATIVE THEORY OF NATURE. Nature must become moral. We are its *educators* — its moral *tangents* — its moral stimuli.[36]

That the inner nature of man is in continuous exchange with the external world, is crucial to the early Romantics. Novalis, again:

> We naturally understand everything that is foreign only by *making* our self *foreign* — *changing our self* — observing our self.[37]

> The poet uses things and words like a keyboard and all of poesy is based on the active association of ideas — on self-activating, intentional, ideal production of chance — (chance — or free catenation).[38]

It may be concluded that according to this theory, subjectivity at its best is in a state of flux[39] or flow, able to experience a highly divergent and fragmented reality as if it were harmonious. Early Romanticism provides a model of aesthetic experience as participation: participation of the arts in each other, of mankind in the arts and of

man in nature, et cetera. Aesthetic experience is an active presupposition in every form of knowledge and in every moral act. By renouncing the pretension of absolute knowledge (whether in the arts, religion, science, politics or philosophy), early Romanticism gains the freedom to fully and freely experience mimesis, performance, and interpretation.

This detour through eighteenth-century German rationalism and idealism shows how a small shift of philosophical perspective may begin a transformation of formalistic solipsism into heterogeneous sensibility. If this already indicates an affinity between early Romanticism and contemporary art, this affinity may be illuminated further by a characterization of early Romantic artistic and aesthetic processes.

### Mimesis and reflexivity, or: art as philosophy, philosophy as art

Just as subjectivity is not a fixed given but an ongoing exchange, so a work of art is, according to early Romantic theory and practice, not subordinated to fixed rules or genres. Making art is a process of playful intermingling: thus it is impossible to delineate 'the' romantic artwork. The heterogeneity that was an explicit aim of the early Romantic aesthetic makes it impossible to summarize their work concisely.

Until the early Romantics challenged this view, mimesis—the imitation of nature—was generally taken to be the single defining characteristic of art. This notion was transformed in the theory and practice of early Romanticism, not because mimesis was replaced by self-expression, as in later romantic art, but because mimesis was combined with reflexivity.

The early Romantics did away with the generally accepted notion that making art should be understood as the imitation of nature, executed according to established rules.[40] Novalis wrote that "The artist takes the essence of his art out of himself—not the least suspicion of imitation can touch him."[41] But it would be precipitated to conclude, just because the romantics opposed the fixed forms and conventions of classicism, that they opposed mimesis as such. What the early Romantics opposed is rather the notion that reality may be known scientifically and realistically before it is experienced aesthetically. In other words: they contested the notion that an artist should fully know the subject matter of his or her work before it has been made. According to them, making art is a mimetic process; but the rules of this imitative game are established while it is being played, and not laid down beforehand.

Opposing the notion of copying nature, they insist that art in itself is a part of nature, nature contemplating itself, imitating itself, developing itself.[42] They encourage the artist to express his inner nature, to represent the infinitely changing facets and associations of inner life. But since this subjectivity is unable, according to early Romantic philosophy, to find a fixed foundation within itself, this inner nature may well be perceived as an imitative representation of outer nature. Art no longer simply imitates nature, but mimesis has become a two-way process. In Novalis' words: "Nature should become art and art should become a second nature."[43] This implies a subjectivity that is willing to know, understand and accept its own impulses, its inner nature.

> Nature will become moral —when out of *real love* for art —it submits to art —does, what art wants —art, when out of real love for nature —it lives for nature, and works after nature. Both have to do it

at once of their own wish —for their own sake —and of the other's wish, for sake of the strange other. They have to meet in themselves with the other and with themselves in the other.[44]

Art is in this conception both imitation, which means a following of rules and the acceptance of genres of representation, and the production of new rules, the establishment of new forms, the conventions of the future. These two are inseparably intertwined. Mimesis has not become superfluous, but is shown to entail new, formerly un-thought of possibilities.

The wish for a methodical liberation of the arts from all restrictions and prescriptions had political implications. This also helps to explain why the early Romantics never developed a consistent political program: their central purpose was the methodical development of a full understanding of liberal artistic development. According to Walter Benjamin, whose discussion of the works of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis still remains the most thorough study of their philosophy[45], such a methodical understanding is to be developed reflexively.

Since the term 'reflexivity' carries several technical and methodological implications, it deserves an introduction.[46] The Latin verb 'reflectere' simply means 'to ply back', and the meaning that has evolved from this is 'to think once again about what is known': the mental testing and comparing of the mind's knowledge. In this process, the thinking self focuses on itself as a microcosm which is able to get to know external objects, or to conduct an act of knowledge: reflexivity, therefore, is the process of thinking critically about thinking. According to Immanuel Kant, reflection is the act by which we discover the subjective conditions under which we arrive at concepts.[47]

Descriptions of reflexivity in terms of 'the subject' or 'the self as microcosm' are still vague. A much more precise analysis has been made by Walter Benjamin, in his dissertation on "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism". This is a reconstruction of the concept of art criticism of Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel, who Benjamin considered to be the main representatives of early German Romanticism.[48] Their philosophy of criticism is based on the phenomenon of thinking that self-consciously reflects upon itself. This process of reflexivity is without ending: thought thinking about thinking can always return to reflect upon itself, which then results in thought thinking about thinking about thinking, and so on. According to the romantics, as opposed to their contemporaries, Germany's idealist philosophers, this potentially endless process of reflexivity does not constitute a sovereign subject, an "I" (as proposed in the philosophies of Fichte and Hegel), but only a medium: the medium of art.

For Novalis and Schlegel, themselves poets and novelists, this art was first of all literature. They considered every work of literature as a reflection, one single stage in the endless process of reflexivity. Every artwork, to them, is by definition preliminary and fragmentary: the process of reflexivity that has been condensed in the work of art can always be continued. Indeed, it deserves to be continued. The very fact that the work of art embodies a series of reflections is what gives the work its dignity, its positive value, because according to romantic theory, "reflection does not take its course into an empty infinity, but is in itself substantial and filled".[49] In other words: the early Romantics systematically thought of artworks as reflections on the traditions of artmaking, and realized that no artwork alone embodies a complete and fulfilled tradition. Therefore, every work of art by definition has its shortcomings, its unfulfilled promises, its rough edges. This does not in any way

devalue it. On the contrary, the tradition of literature and the promises incorporated in that tradition depend on the individual works: the more these works demonstrate their own fragmentary character of unfinished (and therefore: ongoing) reflexivity, the greater their dignity as works of art. This does not mean that the early Romantics disliked well-rounded works, on the contrary. But they did insist that even an immaculately formed literary work is but a stage in an ongoing reflexive process. As Benjamin wrote: "Thus, form is the objective expression of the reflection proper to the work, the reflection that constitutes its essence."[50] This led him to the conclusion that "the idea of art as a medium thus creates for the first time the possibility of an undogmatic or free formalism—a liberal formalism, as the Romantics would say."[51] This liberality is remarkably unlike later romantic positions. Novalis, for example, "proposed to become "at least politically as well as religiously tolerant" and to concede the possibility that "a human being could be inclined differently from us". Such tolerance would eventually lead to the "sublime conviction of a relativity of each positive form" and thereby to the "true independence of a mature spirit with regard to every form that is nothing but a tool for it".[52]

According to this philosophy, the absolute subjectivity that was the goal of idealist philosophy is only to be developed in the medium of art, where it can never reach absolute completion. This development starts when the formal properties of a work of art are considered critically. A critical examination awakens the reflections in the work and continues them: this continuation is nothing else than the creation of a more reflexive new work. Criticism thus takes place within the sphere of art: it is not an external judgment, but an internal development. Instead of opposing critical subjectivity to the medium of art, in early Romantic theory the two are identified.

Schlegel and Novalis were well aware that this philosophy has mystical traits. According to Novalis, philosophy "is a mystical … pervasive idea, driving us ceaselessly in all directions".[53] It dissolves the subject by emphasizing the reality of reflection over the reality of physical personal identity. As Schlegel wrote, "everything is in us… we are only a part of ourselves."[54]

Early Romantic theory tends to appreciate the idea of art as the medium of reflection and of developing subjectivity more than the individual artwork. Although it is the form of the individual work that defines the coherence of its reflections, this coherence may always be dissolved by further reflection: that is the highest purpose of the individual work.[55] And yet the only legitimate criticism of an artwork is another work: a work that has incorporated its predecessor within a new form and adds a new level of reflection, creating a stronger coherence that is based on the earlier work.

This aesthetic does not prescribe any specific form or genre to the artist. Reflection may start anywhere, choose anything as its point of departure, or as its content material, and develop its own mimetic rules: that is implied by its liberal formalism. This philosophical romanticism is quite distant from the much more widespread notion of romantic art as the free expression of the personality, the arbitrary subjectivity of the artist.[56] Indeed, as Benjamin underlines, reflexive art is characterized by sobriety[57]; he quotes Novalis' opinion that romantic art has to be remunerable, reliably repeated and mechanical.[58] Typical of the romantic work of art is not its point of departure, which may well be intimately personal, but its ensuing methodical and formal development.

[1] Ernst Behler: "'Early Romanticism'… did not originate as a period designation until the beginning of our [20th] century and became an established category only during the latter half of it." Behler: "German Romantic literary theory", p. 299.
[2] Schulte-Sasse, quoting Paul de Man, in his "General Introduction—Romanticism's Paradoxical Articulation of Desire", in: "Theory as Practice", p. 1.
[3] Behler: "German Romantic literary theory", p. 300.
[4] Andreas Michel and Assenka Oksiloff: "Romantic Crossovers: Philosophy as Art and Art as Philosophy", in Schulte-Sasse: "Theory as Practice", p. 158-9.
[5] All the following quotations from: "Earliest Program for a System of German Idealism ", in Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*. p. 72-3. Likely authors of this text are Schelling, Hegel and Hölderlin. It is generally considered to be a manifesto of early romanticism. Cf. Braeckman: "De waarheid van de kunst", passim.
[6] Novalis: "The Universal Brouillon", fragment 924, in Schulte-Sasse: "Theory as Practice", p. 239.
[7] Cf. Frank: "Intellektuale Anschauung", p. 109.
[8] Mittman and Strand, "Representing Self and Other in Early German Romanticism", in: Schulte-Sasse, "Theory as Practice", p. 51.
[9] Frank: "Intellektuale Anschauung", p. 115.
[10] Benjamin: "The Concept of Criticism", Selected Writings Volume 1, p. 128.
[11] Frank: "Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik", p. 222; author's translation of: "Ich nenne 'romantisch' die Philosophie, in der die Spekulation auf den Anspruch verzichtet, das Absolute durch Reflexion zu erreichen — und diesen Mangel durchs Medium der Kunst supplementiert."
[12] Novalis: "Fichte Studies", in Schulte-Sasse: "Theory as Practice", p. 108.
[13] Cf. Frank: "Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik", p. 300. The term "negative dialectic" refers to Adorno.
[14] Kant, quoted in Frank, "Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik", p. 44: "idealism der Erscheinungen: wir sind zum Theil Schöpfer derselben aus dem Standpunkte, den wir Annehmen. Dichter."
[15] Tieck: "Eine gute Verwirrung ist mehr wert, als eine schlechte Ordnung." Quoted in Frank: "Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik", p. 48.
[16] Novalis: "Werke", p. 334.
[17] Novalis, in Frank: "Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik", p. 270. Translations by the author.
[18] Novalis: "Werke", p. 310-11.
[19] Ibid., p. 327.
[20] See Schulte-Sasse: "Theory as Practice", p. 15-16.
[21] Roberts: "The Logic of Reflection", p. 31.
[22] Kant: "Critique of Judgment", paragraph 20.
[23] Ibid., p. 56: "Here, now, we may perceive that nothing is postulated in the judgment of taste but such a *universal voice* in respect of delight that is not mediated by concepts; consequently, only the *possibility* of an aesthetic judgment capable of being at the same time deemed valid for every one. The judgment of taste itself does not *postulate* the agreement of every one…; it only *imputes* this agreement to every one…"
[24] Michel and Oksiloff: "Romantic Crossovers: Philosophy as Art and Art as Philosophy", in Schulte-Sasse: "Theory as Practice", p. 174.
[25] Ibid., p. 175.
[26] Jochen Fried, in Behler and Hörisch: "Die Aktualität der Frühromantik", p. 175.
[27] Novalis: "Je poetischer, je wahrer." "Werke", p. 413.
[28] Michel and Oksiloff, in Schulte-Sasse: "Theory as Practice", p. 176.
[29] Ibid., p. 177.
[30] Quoted in Behler: "German Romantic literary theory", p. 296.
[31] Novalis: "Faith and Love. The King and the Queen", in Behler: "German Romantic literary theory", p. 61.
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[33] Behler: "German Romantic literary theory", p. 59.
[34] Ibid., p. 61.
[35] Novalis, in Behler: "German Romantic literary theory", p. 60.
[36] Novalis: "The Universal Brouillon", in Schulte-Sasse: "Theory as Practice", p. 228.
[37] Ibid., p. 237.
[38] Ibid., p. 239-40.
[39] Cf. Schulte-Sasse: "Theory as Practice", p. 291.
[40] On the classical model of art as mimetic imitation, see Behler: "German Romantic literary theory", p. 301-2.
[41] Novalis, Werke, p. 393: "Der Künstler nimmt das Wesen seiner Kunst aus sich — auch nicht der leiseste Verdacht von Nachahmung kann ihn treffen."
[42] Ibid., p. 533.
[43] Ibid., p. 413: "Natur soll Kunst und Kunst zweite Natur werden."
[44] Ibid., p. 450: "ZUKUNFTSLEHRE. (Kosmogogik.) Die Natur wird moralisch sein — wenn sie aus *echter Liebe* zur Kunst — sich der Kunst hingibt — tut, was die Kunst will — die Kunst, wenn sie aus echter Liebe

zur Natur — für die Natur lebt, und nach der Natur arbeitet. Beide müssen es zugleich *aus eigner Wahl* — um ihrer selbst willen — und aus fremder Wahl um des andrer willen, tun. Sie müssen in sich selbst mit dem andern und mit sich selbst im andern zusammentreffen."

[45] Cf. Lisa C. Roetzel, in Schulte-Sasse: "Theory as Practice", p. 381, note 13.

[46] The need for a careful introduction is made even greater by the fact that the terms 'reflection' and 'reflexivity' have too often been overlooked or neglected in Anglo-American philosophy. The extensive, eight-volume Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Ed. Paul Edwards; Macmillan & The Free Press, 1967) simply omitted the terms; the more recent Oxford Companion to Philosophy (Ed. Ted Honderich, Oxford U.P., 1995) presents under the lemma 'reflexivity' only some logical distinctions of a self-referential binary logical relation.

[47] Roberts: "The Logic of Reflection", p. 5.

[48] Walter Benjamin: "Selected Writings" Volume 1, p. 118-9.

[49] Ibid., p. 129.

[50] Ibid., p. 156.

[51] Ibid., p. 158.

[52] Behler: "German Romantic literary theory", p. 60.

[53] Novalis, quoted in Benjamin: "Selected Writings" Volume 1, p. 139, translation altered.

[54] Schlegel, quoted in Benjamin: "Selected Writings" Volume 1, p. 131.

[55] Benjamin: "the individual work of art should be dissolved in the medium of art …", "Selected Writings" Volume 1, p. 153.

[56] Cf. Benjamin: "The Concept of Criticism" in "Selected Writings" Volume 1, p. 195, note 216 on the wholly false modernization of Romantic doctrines. Thus, the suspicion that romanticism is nothing but the subjectivation of aesthetics, based on Kants concept of the genius, is unfounded. This fear has been expressed by Gadamer in the first part of his 'Truth and Method'; cf. Frank, "Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik", p. 127.

[57] Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism", "Selected Writings" Volume 1, p. 175.

[58] Ibid., p. 176. This is one of the connections between Benjamin's early works that are identified openly with his early romantic predecessors, and his later 'marxist' works, like his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".