
A Large Complex: Meditations on Instrumental Rationality and Adorno while shopping in Ikea.

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“All are free to dance and enjoy themselves, just as they have been free, since the historical neutralization of religion, to join any of the innumerable sects. But freedom to choose an ideology - since ideology always reflects economic coercion - everywhere proves to be freedom to choose what is always the same.” (Adorno, 1944)

*“I’m all lost in the supermarket
I can no longer shop happily
I came in here for that special offer
A guaranteed personality” (The Clash, 1977)*

Theodor W. Adorno was one of the most important philosophers and social critics in Germany after World War II. The scope of Adorno's influence stems from the interdisciplinary character of his research and that of the Frankfurt School to which he belonged as well as the thoroughness with which he examined Western philosophical traditions. He was a seminal social theorist and a leading member of the first generation of critical theorists putting forward many critiques of western consumer society including “instrumental rationality.” In terms of social and critical theory, instrumental rationality is often seen as a specific form of rationality focusing on the most efficient or cost-effective means to achieve a specific end, but not in itself reflecting on the value of that end. Many Marxists and others believed that capitalism’s economic and social relations had spread from controlling ‘primary’ production to all facets of human life; in Max Weber’s words they have been normalized and rationalized. What kind of ‘art’ based on what principles and made within what actual circumstances, could offer opposition or at least a resistance to this situation?

It is clear that Adorno was strongly ambivalent on the issue of an autonomous art, which claimed to separate itself from the rest of a ‘corrupting society’. An art, it was claimed, that was concerned centrally with itself as a practice, and therefore was unhinged from any relationship to social or ideological factors imprecated by capitalism.

A criticism often levelled at modernism is its active engagement with mechanization to the point where it became a central aesthetic to the movement. This can be traced back to one of the most famous forerunners of modernism – the Bauhaus. Gropius’s opening manifesto (1919) proclaimed that the Bauhaus would “create a new guild of craftsmen, without the class distinctions which raise an arrogant barrier between craftsmen and artist”.

The early intention was for the Bauhaus to be a combined architecture school, crafts school, and academy of the arts. Gropius argued that a new period of history had begun with the end of the war and he wanted to create a new architectural style to reflect this new era. The style in architecture and consumer goods was to be functional, cheap, and consistent with mass production. To these ends, Gropius wanted to reunite art and craft to arrive at high-end functional products with artistic aspirations. Many believed that German reform in art education was critical for economic reasons. Since the country lacked the quantity of raw materials that the United States and Great Britain had, they had to rely on the proficiency of its skilled labour force and ability to export innovative and high quality goods. Therefore designers were needed as was a new type of art education. This was reflected in the school's philosophy which stated that the artist should be trained to work with industry: a philosophical legacy that would last even into the twenty-first century.

It can be argued that IKEA, the Swedish furniture giant claims ownership of this legacy as the company follows the principle that most of its furniture and accessories are made for purchasers to self-assemble and so engage with the pure functionality of the object. Originally, IKEA sold pens, wallets, picture frames, stockings or practically anything Kamprad found a need for. Furniture was first added to the IKEA product range in 1947 and, in 1955 IKEA began to design its own furniture. The company motto is the rather Orwellian: "Affordable Solutions for Better Living".

IKEA furniture is well known for its modern, utilitarian design with much of it being self-assemble furniture (also known as "flat-pack") designed to be assembled by the consumer rather than being sold pre-assembled. This permits them to reduce costs and use of packaging by not shipping 'air'; the volume of a bookcase, for example, is considerably less if it is shipped unassembled rather than assembled. This is also a practical point for many of the chain's European customers, where public transport is commonly used; the flat-pack distribution method allows for easier transit via public transport from the store to a customer's home for assembly.

The company contends that it has been a pioneering force in sustainable approaches to mass consumer culture. Kamprad refers to the concept as "democratic design," meaning that the company applies an integrated approach to manufacturing and design. In a response to the explosion of human population and material expectations in the twentieth and twenty-first century, the company implements economies of scale capturing material streams and creating manufacturing processes that hold costs and resources down. An unfortunate aspect to this is the extensive use of chipboard, the intended result of which is flexible, adaptable home furnishings. However the use of cheap materials inevitably leads to badly assembled furniture whose ultimate destination is the city dump.

Newer IKEA shop buildings are usually very large blue boxes with few windows. They are often designed around a "one-way" layout, which leads customers along "the natural way". This layout is designed to encourage the customer to see the store in its entirety (as opposed to a traditional retail store, which allows a consumer to go right to the section where the goods and services needed are displayed). The sequence involves going through furniture showrooms, household goods (market-hall), then the warehouse where one collects flat packs for products seen in the showrooms, and then arrive at the cashier's station to make payment.

The development of capitalism as a system embracing all production within urban, industrialised societies had been well established by Marx. For Adorno and Benjamin two key issues dominate Marx's legacy: firstly, how art/culture embodies and represents the type of society within which it is made, and against which certain artists may try and pit themselves; and secondly, whether a sphere of practices and values can be created and defended which stands outside the structures and effects of capitalism as a system which threatens to engulf all of human life and interests. These questions were politically as well as theoretically, vital, because the authors were writing in the context of the aftermath of the WWI, the Bolshevik revolution and the growth of fascism in the 1930s.

In the decade that followed Walter Benjamin's suicide, many of his ideas began to surface in Adorno's writings. In 1941, Adorno moved to southern California to join Max Horkheimer and Friedrich Pollock who had moved there because of the former's health problems. There, Adorno and Horkheimer collaborated closely on a major statement of their now common position, which drew heavily on Benjamin's legacy. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, first published in 1947 but not widely read until the 1960s, indicated to many the Frankfurt School's growing disenchantment with Marxism, even in its heterodox forms, and its concomitant embrace of what Benjamin, many years earlier in his more militant period, had attacked as "left melancholia" (*Linke Melancholie*, 1931). The economic base for this shift had been given by Pollock in several essays he had contributed to the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* on "state capitalism" (*State Capitalism: Its possibilities and limitations*, 1941). Although not contending that capitalism had resolved all its contradictions, Pollock intimated that state intervention in the economy had allowed it to contain and displace them indefinitely. The choice Pollock suggested was between democratic and authoritarian versions of state capitalism, rather than between capitalism per se and socialism.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the authors reached even gloomier conclusions about the ways in which Western society had undermined its emancipatory potential: "Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity."¹

In terms that harked back to Nietzsche and Weber as well as Marx, they explored the unexpectedly pernicious effect of rationality – understood in its instrumental, subjective sense – in producing the present crisis. The more substantive and synthetic reason, which German idealism had called *Vernunft* in opposition to the merely analytical *Verstand* (intellect or understanding) had become 'eclipsed' - to borrow the title of a book by Horkheimer written during the same years. However much rationality sought to free man from mythic thinking, he remained caught in its nexus. They claimed Enlightenment had inadvertently produced its opposite for two basic reasons. First, instrumental reason was closely related to the exchange principle in which everything was reduced to an abstract equivalent of everything else in the service of universal exchange. Or to put it in terms that Adorno would frequently employ, the qualitatively different and non-identical was forced into the mould of quantitative identity. One of its most prominent victims was the unique individual, which had come into its own during the period of bourgeois ascendancy. Horkheimer and Adorno treated its passing in a highly nuanced way, both mourning its loss and realizing its limitations. But they had very little use for the various forms of collective pseudo-subjectivity that had replaced it.

The second source of instrumental reason's inadvertently destructive effect was its link with the domination of nature. Carolyn Merchant notes how historically the metaphor of dominion spread from the religious to the social and political spheres, a mind set that was made more intense by the scientific world view that conceived of reality as a machine instead of an organism. As a consequence the domination of nature as well as of women was authorised.² Previously the medieval theory of society had emphasised the whole while stressing the value of each part. The connection between the parts was integrated through a universal harmony pervading the whole.³ As Kate Soper points out, there is a correlation in the philosophical dualism of Descartes which opposed God and nature, mind and body.⁴

This led the natural world being reduced to Latin names, whose qualitative differences were lost in the name of scientific control, subjective domination of objects paved the way for the comparable domination of subjects through "reification". The primary clues to these revisions come from a theory of reification proposed by the Hungarian socialist Georg Lukács in the 1920s and from interdisciplinary projects and debates conducted by members of the Institute of Social Research in the 1930s and 1940s. Building on Max Weber's theory of rationalization, Lukács argues that the capitalist economy is no longer one sector of society alongside others. Rather, commodity exchange has become the central organizing principle for all sectors of society. This allows commodity fetishism to permeate all social institutions (e.g. law, administration, journalism) as well as all academic disciplines, including philosophy. "Reification" refers to "the structural process whereby the commodity form permeates life in capitalist society." Lukács was especially concerned with how reification makes human beings "seem like mere things obeying the inexorable laws of the marketplace".⁵

Initially Adorno shared this concern, even though he never had Lukács's confidence that the revolutionary working class could overcome reification. Later Adorno called the reification of consciousness an "epiphenomenon." In his opinion what a critical social theory really needed to address is why hunger, poverty, and other forms of human suffering persist despite the technological and scientific potential to mitigate them or eliminate them altogether. The root cause, he says, lies in how capitalist relations of production have come to dominate society as a whole, leading to extreme, albeit often invisible, concentrations of wealth and power.⁶

Domination of the external world led to control of man's internal nature and ultimately of the social world as well. Fascism, Horkheimer and Adorno argued, could be partly understood as the return of man's mythic repressed past and the revenge of dominated nature, which employed many of the tools developed by instrumental reason in the service of that domination. 'Progress' began to spawn its antithesis, a barbarism all the more brutal because of its use of modern techniques of control. Science, rather than being an unequivocal force for human betterment, proved to contain the seeds of a new form of dehumanization. One of its preconditions was the obliterated memory of a state in which nature was not yet dominated by instrumental reason. In fact, "all reification", Horkheimer and Adorno insisted, "is forgetting".⁷

In their opinion, in the allegedly democratic countries of the capitalist world, the dialectic of enlightenment produced that forgetting in more subtle ways than in their authoritarian rivals, but the results were no less regrettable. Through what they referred to as the 'culture industry', mass consciousness was manipulated and distorted to the point where critical thinking was threatened with extermination. With a passion that had previously been

expressed by right-wing critics of mass culture, they denounced the insidious ways in which popular entertainment demeaned and cheated its consumers. Standardisation and pseudo-individualization belied the claims of mass culture to cater to individual tastes. The process of commodification that Marx had identified in the nineteenth century, in fact, permeated virtually all levels of consumer culture. In what Adorno called the “administered world” (the prototype for what Marcuse was later to make famous as “one dimensional society”), the permeation of ideology had gone so far that all resistance was virtually eliminated.

How can this be, the authors ask. How can the progress of modern science and medicine and industry promise to liberate people from ignorance, disease, and brutal, mind-numbing work, yet help create a world where people willingly swallow fascist ideology, knowingly practice deliberate genocide, and energetically develop lethal weapons of mass destruction? Reason, they answer, has become irrational. Although they cite Francis Bacon as a leading spokesman for an instrumentalized reason that becomes irrational, Horkheimer and Adorno do not think that modern science and scientism are the sole culprits. The tendency of rational progress to become irrational regress arises through various economic determinants.

This text begins with the assumption that capitalism and culture cannot escape each other, largely led by the character and dynamics of capitalism, a mode of economic production decisively shaping the social and political relationships of groups and individuals within the urban industrialised nation-states during the nineteenth and twentieth century. Even the materials that have gone into the making of ‘art’ are themselves fundamentally shaped within, and are part of, capitalist structures of production and consumption. ‘Materials’ in this sense is a term which denotes the entire range of physical and ideological components, which have constituted both art objects and the debates about the status, and value of these objects within the culture of particular societies during the modern period.

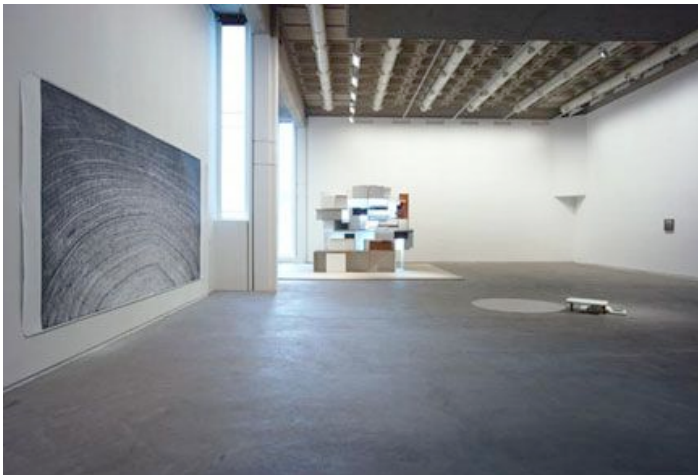
Appendix.

In *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen describes Adorno’s theory as “appear(ing) to us today as a ruin of history, mutilated and damaged by the very conditions of its articulation and genesis...”⁸ Perhaps this is what I find while walking the endless isles of Ikea. Indeed its Huyssen’s claim that the general view that the opposition modernism had towards mass culture may in fact lead one to conclude that perhaps neither of the two protagonists can do without each other, “and that there much heralded mutual exclusivity is really a sign of their secret independence”.⁹ Modernism and the culture industry (to include the objects we desire) seem to converge in Adorno’s writings in curious ways rather than being diametrically opposed, as is often the interpreted view. Locating elements of the culture industry, with Adorno’s *l’art pour l’art* attitude may serve two purposes. It could help the view that Adorno’s view of the culture industry and modernism is not quite as binary and closed as it appears. And, on a much broader level, it may point us – in a reverse of Adorno’s strategy – toward a desirable and overdue exploration of how modernism itself appropriates and transfers elements of popular culture.



[Fig. 1. Installation shot of Void gallery, Derry. The assemblage is made up of three kitchens and a small living room bought in IKEA.]

The status of objects as commodities – objects produced within specific economic and social relations of production and consumption (capitalism) produced by the industry and the high valued objects deemed ‘art’ (culture) - and the political and ideological ramifications of interchanging these things are the substance of the arguments and energies contained within this text and explored in an exhibition held in the Douglas Hyde gallery (Dublin, 13 March – 10 April) and Void (Derry, 12 January – 15 February) during 2008. As part of the exhibition a large number of flat packs were bought in IKEA Belfast. If the instructions had been followed in the ordinary way the units would have built three kitchens and the furniture for a small living room. For the first show, held in Void, the material was constructed with a view to filling the Void, when the viewer entered the space the first impression was of a storage room for unwanted furniture stacked to the ceiling. Once it was negotiated, the work took on a more chaotic but recognisable form.



[Fig. 2. Installation shot of Douglas Hyde Gallery, “A Large Complex” is in the background.]

The work was disassembled and shipped to the Dublin venue where it was rebuilt but in a different manner with the assemblage taking on a more introverted look with its sprawling pervious form junked for a taller more self-contained shape. As with the Void’s subterranean aspect the Douglas Hyde’s architectural aspect was considered carefully. A unique quality to the gallery is that you enter into the space from above with the first glimpse of the main space

from an elevated point of view. So rather than being confronted with a pile of shapes in the Void, the assemblage took on a more schematic or 3D projection similar to instructions. Once the show was finished the work was disassembled once again and an ad. was posted on a recycling website called Jumbletown.ie, which provides a service for people who want to give away things they no longer needed but still felt had some use value. The flat packs were advertised as unassembled units, without instructions. Brendan O'Reilly and his son Jason [Fig. 3. Brendan and Jason O'Reilly.] came and collected the units (three kitchens and a small sitting room) and packed the lot into the back of their car [Fig. 5. Elements from IKEA kitchens.] to be built as a new kitchen in their house.



[Fig. 3. Brendan and Jason O'Reilly.]

The increasing commodification of culture and its effects in cultural products are pervasive and has been the subject of many a postmodern dialectic. What I am interested in is the implied notion that function and use are determined by corporate intentions, and that exchange value (in economic terms) has totally supplanted use value. Perhaps the double danger with Adorno's theory is that the specificity of cultural products is wiped out and that the consumer is imagined in a state of passive regression. Objects as commodities, after all, do fulfil public functions; satisfying and legitimizing cultural or indeed practical needs which are not all per se false or only retroactive; this process, as Huysen points out, "articulates social contradictions in order to homogenize them".¹⁰ But this process of articulation can be also the field of contest and struggle, as Fredric Jameson puts it in *The Archaeologies of the Future*, it is time to transform the present into the past of something yet to come.

¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1947), edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 1.

² Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), p. 3.

³ Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, p71.

⁴ Kate Soper, *What is Nature?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 43.

⁵ Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 76.

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 189-92.

⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 230.

⁸ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 18.

⁹ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, p. 16.

¹⁰ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, p. 22.