3. ‘All Reification Is a Forgetting’: Benjamin, Adorno, and the Dialectic of Reification

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In his contribution to the book *The Idea of Communism*, Slavoj Žižek argues that ‘we can no longer talk about “reification” in the classic Lukácsian sense. Far from being invisible, social relationality in its very fluidity is directly the object of marketing and exchange’ (Žižek, 2010, p. 221). While reification in the traditional sense referred to the apprehension of social relations as things—for instance, to consider the price of an object as a mysterious and autonomous force, instead of something that has its origin in human labour mediated by relations of commodity exchange—today these social relations themselves have become the model of the commodity form, as industrial capitalism has turned into ‘cultural’ capitalism, intellectual and immaterial labour are becoming increasingly predominant, and information and experience the primary consumer goods. Indeed, in a world in which, more than ever, ‘all that is solid melts into air’, the critique of reification might run the risk of identifying with the aggressor. Hence, it is worthwhile to take a look at earlier critiques of Lukács’s critique of reification, of which those of Adorno and Benjamin are the most original.

Adorno’s indebtedness to Lukács theory of reification is quite well known, as is his later critique of Lukács in *Negative Dialectics*. There, Adorno argues that Lukács fails to distinguish between reification and what he calls objectivation. While the critique of reification rightfully exposes the thing-like object as part of the total social process, this critique thereby also tends to reduce the entire meaning of the object to the meaning-giving social subject, not allowing anything alien above and beyond the subject’s reach. Lukács, in short, ignores what one might call the *surplus* of meaning of the object itself, and hence relapses into idealism. As Adorno writes:

If a man looks upon thingness as radical evil, if he would like to dynamize all entity into pure actuality, he tends to be hostile to otherness, to the alien thing that has lent its name to alienation, and not in vain. (1963, p. 191)
Against this, Adorno argues:

The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one’s own. (p. 191)

In other words, the ‘thingness’ of the object should not be completely translated into the product of social relations, as the theory of reification seems to imply. The ‘alienness’ of the object, for Adorno, is also the recognition that there is something beyond the subject’s reach, i.e. beyond what can be reduced to subjectivity.

Less well known, however, is the critique of the concept of reification developed by Adorno’s mentor and friend, Walter Benjamin. Robert Hullot-Kentor, for instance, writes that Adorno ‘in opposition to both Benjamin and the early Lukács [...] did not reify the critique of reification’ (Hullot-Kentor, 2006, p. 249; emphasis added). As true as this may be with regard to Lukács, I do not agree with Hullot-Kentor where it concerns Benjamin. Or to put it more strongly, I believe that Adorno’s critique of the critique of reification is largely derived from Benjamin’s work, and developed in dialogue with Benjamin, as I will try to show in what follows. To do this, I will first take a look at a discussion on the concept of reification in the correspondence between Adorno and Benjamin. Next, I will discuss how Benjamin’s concept of reification is closely connected to the theory of allegory developed in the *Trauerspiel* book, which later returns, albeit in a different form, in the figure of the collector from the *Arcades Project*. This figure, I will argue, can be considered as an ‘emblem’ of Benjamin’s theory of reification. Finally, I will come back to Adorno and to the way the Benjaminian dialectic of reification functions in his aesthetics, more specifically in the relation between art and natural beauty.

1. ‘All Reification Is a Forgetting’

In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno famously stated that ‘all reification is forgetting’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 191). But the first time this line appears is in a letter from Adorno to Walter Benjamin, dated 29 February 1940. In it, Adorno expresses his enthusiasm for Benjamin’s rewritten version of the essay on Baudelaire, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’. In this essay, Benjamin introduces the distinction between
Erfahrung and Erlebnis—Erfahrung as the kind of experience connected to and embedded in tradition, as a collective memory, and Erlebnis as an isolated shock-experience that cannot find its way into memory, or only to a distorted voluntary memory.

In his letter, Adorno expresses his appreciation for Benjamin’s theory of experience, but proposes to develop it further by connecting it to the concept of reification. He writes:

Is it not the case that the real task here is to bring the entire opposition between Erlebnis and Erfahrung into relation with a dialectical theory of forgetting? Or one could equally say, into relation with a theory of reification. For all reification is a forgetting: objects become purely thing-like the moment they are retained for us without the continued presence of their other aspects: when something of them has been forgotten. (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999, p. 321)

He continues saying that:

there is absolutely no question for us of merely repeating Hegel’s [and here one could probably also fill in Lukács’s name, TL] verdict upon reification here, but rather of formulating a proper critique of reification, i.e. of unfolding the contradictory moments that are involved in such forgetting; or one could also say, of formulating a distinction between good and bad reification. (P. 321)

Finally, Adorno also proposes to involve Benjamin’s concept of aura in this theory of forgetting, for, in his view, Benjamin’s aura is nothing but the forgetting of human labour invested in things. I will return to the concept of aura in the last section.

In his response of 7 May 1940, Benjamin reacts somewhat reluctantly to Adorno’s proposals. Although there might be all sorts of personal reasons for this reluctance, there are at least two possible theoretical ones, too. First, Benjamin had already developed the dialectical theory of reification Adorno suggests quite some time earlier, namely in the theory of allegory that was part of his analysis of the German Baroque mourning play. Second, Adorno’s formulation of ‘a distinction between good and bad reification’ might have struck Benjamin as strangely undialectical, as if the two could be neatly categorized and separated. It does not fit into Benjamin’s ideas about reification, according to which reification might be redeemed precisely by taking it to its extreme.
2. Reification and Allegory

As Benjamin argues in his study of the Trauerspiel, baroque melancholy maintains a double relation to the world of things, once characterized by Winfried Menninghaus as a dialectic of devaluation (Entwertung) and sanctification (Erhebung) (Menninghaus, 1980). For the Baroque poets, who were Lutherans, the ‘natural’ order of the cosmos is lost, and the world of things devalued; grace awaits us only in the afterlife. On the other side, however, the melancholic attitude, as described by Benjamin, is characterized by a perpetual attribution of new meanings to dead objects, thereby ‘sanctifying’ them as the potential key to eternal knowledge. Thus, the melancholic grants devalued objects an opportunity to possess a new life.

Allegory, as Benjamin argues, is the expression of this melancholic worldview. As he so brilliantly puts it: ‘The allegory of the seventeenth century is not convention of expression, but expression of convention’ (Benjamin, 1977, p. 175). In allegorical language, everything can become the sign for anything else, sometimes turning a thing into its exact opposite—a crown becomes a funeral wreath and an angel’s harp turns into an executioner’s axe (p. 231). However, in order to receive its allegorical meaning, the object must be torn out of its original context. This is why, according to Benjamin, the most prominent Baroque emblems are the ruin, the corpse, and the skull: objects that are already dead, whose life has literally withered away, and are therefore available for the allegorist to fill with new meaning. One might also say that these objects are allegories of allegory.

Although the Trauerspiel study precedes Benjamin’s ‘turn’ to Marxism, it is not hard to see that his critique of Baroque conventionalism fits well into a Marxist critique of the commodity form. This is precisely why Benjamin recognized so much of his own thoughts when he was first introduced to Lukács’s critique of reification and commodification in History and Class Conscience, which, in a later newspaper review, he praises as one of the books that ‘remain alive’ (Benjamin, 1972, p. 171).

Indeed, the commodity form has a central place in Benjamin’s analysis of modernity in the Arcades Project. Like Lukács, Benjamin conceives of the commodity not merely as an economic form, but as something that permeates the lives and minds of people. As we come to express everything in terms of exchange value, the way we perceive our world and each other changes. The commodity, as Marx already argues, is exchangeable for any other commodity through the medium of money, and therefore the commodity is deprived of its specific meaning. Herein lies the affinity between commodity and allegory, which similarly sucks the life out of
any object: ‘The devaluation of the world of things in allegory is surpassed within the world of things itself by the commodity’ (Benjamin, 2003, p. 164).

Although Benjamin himself never states it explicitly, one could translate the dialectical poles of allegory, devaluation, and sanctification into a dialectic of reification. As objects enter the market and become commodities, their original meaning is stripped from them and replaced by their price. Or, to put it in Marx’s terms, their use value is eclipsed by their exchange value. The commodity is a product of human labour, but no longer recognized as such, and taken for a nature-like thing: natural history (*Naturgeschichte*), as Benjamin calls it. Life is drained from the object and what remains is an empty shell, similar to the Baroque emblems of the ruin, the skull, and the corpse.

However, the other pole of the allegory—sanctification—is equally present in commodification. New meanings are granted to commodities, as Benjamin points out by quoting Marx: ‘Value [...] converts every product into a social hieroglyphic’. The exchange value of the commodity is considered as a force of its own, a force beyond man. Hence the reference to the fetish; Marx famously speaks of the ‘theological niceties and metaphysical subtleties’ of the commodity (Marx, 1990, p. 163). Benjamin appropriates Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism quite creatively yet also quite literally: in his *Arcades Project* he describes how in nineteenth-century Paris the commodity is worshipped in a very specific location, namely the shopping windows in the arcades. There, commodities became fetishes in the most literal sense: they were put on pedestals, edifices, and in alcoves, worshipped as holy relics by a crowd passing by them as in a religious procession.

Although the worshipping of commodities in consumer capitalism that has the Paris arcades as its temple is clearly ideological, Benjamin refuses to reject it as mere false consciousness. He was fascinated by these new meanings, the collective dreams and fears that were projected onto dead objects. This epoch, he argues, witnessed the dawn of a new mythology. Myth means the transformation of history into nature: social processes are presented as necessary and inevitable. However, taken to its extreme, commodity fetishism makes the opposite movement. This movement finds its expression in the souvenir: ‘The key figure in early allegory is the corpse. In late allegory, it is the ‘souvenir’. The ‘souvenir’ is the schema of the commodity’s transformation into an object for the collector’ (Benjamin, 2003, p. 190). For Benjamin, the nineteenth-century collector, who roams the curiosity shops of the arcades in search for the missing piece of his collection, is a utopian figure, who functions as an emblem for a different relationship to the world of things. To find out what this relationship entails, we will have a closer look at him.
3. The Collector

In the *Arcades Project* we read that ‘the true collector detaches the object from its functional relations’ (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 207). This indeed recalls one important aspect of Lukács’s notion of reification, namely the reification of objects (as distinguished from the reification of human labour power, or the reification of social relations). To turn a commodity into something collectable means, in the first place, to strip it of its use value: a toy collector does not play with his collection just as a philatelist does not use his stamps to send letters. But the collector also charges the object with new meaning: a meaning the object gains by entering in a different relationship with the other collectables. This relationship between different objects within a collection, which is no longer functional but aesthetic, is what Benjamin calls a ‘constellation’. In constructing constellations, the collector seems quite similar to the allegorist: he strips the object of its original context (devaluation), but also grants it a new meaning (sanctification) by turning the object into a ‘souvenir’.

However, Benjamin argues that the collector differs from the allegorist in some crucial ways. First, the collector approaches the objects with love instead of spleen (Pensky, 1993, p. 243). In the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin shows that the Baroque allegorist finally considers the entire earthly realm as an allegory for the afterlife, thus betraying the world of things. The collector, by contrast, has a love for things. The objects ‘strike him’, Benjamin writes, which implies that the collector is attentive to their meaning, instead of the meaning he projects on them (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 205).

Second, as Benjamin writes: ‘[F]or the collector, the world is present, and indeed ordered, in each of his objects. Ordered, however, according to a surprising and, for the profane understanding, incomprehensible connection’ (p. 207). The collector pays attention not merely to the object at hand, but also to its previous owners, where the object has been, in short for the path the object has travelled before it was put in his hands and became part of his collection. As such, each object indeed presents an alternative order of history. The collector considers his own relation to the object as an intervention in its afterlife.

The collector, finally, does not consider the order of things as merely conventional, as the allegorist does. Benjamin writes:

[The allegorist] has given up the attempt to elucidate things through research into their properties and relations. He dislodges things from their context and, from the outset, relies on his profundity to illuminate
their meaning. The collector, by contrast, brings together what belongs together; by keeping in mind their affinities and their succession in time, he can eventually furnish information about his objects. (P. 211)

The problem of course is that there is no rule or law to determine ‘what belongs together’. Therefore, the opposition between allegorist and collector is itself a dialectical one, as Benjamin writes: ‘In every collector hides an allegorist, and in every allegorist a collector’ (p. 211). Both collector and allegorist consider the world as ruinous and fragmentary, but although the collector remains hopeful of finding the ‘true’ order of the fragments, the allegorist has given up on the world.

To come back to our main concern: I believe we might consider the figure of the collector as the ‘emblem’, so to speak, of Benjamin’s dialectic of reification. The collector takes commodification to its extreme: he strips the obsolete and old-fashioned commodities from their final social remnants. But in doing so, Benjamin argues, he also liberates them from servitude. He writes:

[The collector] makes his concern the transfiguration of things. To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them. But he bestows on them only connoisseur value, rather than use value. The collector dreams his way not only into a distant or bygone world but also into a better one—one in which, to be sure, human beings are no better provided with what they need than in the everyday world, but in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful. (P. 9)

Here it is important to keep in mind the specific kind of collector Benjamin has in mind, namely the nineteenth-century-type collector of curiosities, who collects obsolete objects that others consider to be junk, and not the kind of art collector we see today, for whom a collection functions as a display of wealth, or a way to either speculate with or store money capital.6

While the Benjaminian kind of collecting is today a marginal phenomenon at best, one might argue that the last remnants of it have moved to the world of art—that is, not to art collections, but rather to artistic practices that involve collections or collectables. These practices of course have their origin in the objet trouvé of Dadaism and Surrealism, movements that were important sources of inspiration for Benjamin himself,7 and later also for movements such as the Situationist International and artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, Robert Rauschenberg, and Claes Oldenburg. These
movements and artists have considered the artwork itself as a collection of worn-out or discarded objects, which they revive by placing them into a constellation, i.e. an aesthetic relationship with other objects (cf. Owens, 1980; Crimp, 1993; Krauss, 1999).

For Adorno, however, the dialectic of reification that the collector stands for is the model for the aesthetic experience per se. It was precisely for this reason that he famously accused Benjamin of thinking undialectically when the latter discarded autonomous art as ‘counterrevolutionary’ in his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’ (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999, p. 128). Still, in Aesthetic Theory Adorno is in dialogue with his friend, as he deploys the Benjaminian dialectic of reification to rescue the idea of autonomous art and the aesthetic experience.8

4. Adorno’s Dialectic of Reification

That the dialectic of reification discussed above is one of the cardinal principles of Adorno’s aesthetics is most clearly expressed in his provocative statement in Aesthetic Theory that ‘the absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity’ (Adorno, 1997, p. 28). Although Adorno considers art as perhaps the last harbour of refuge against reification and commodity fetishism, it can only function as such through a process of reification and fetishization. Referring back to his statement, Adorno writes:

If artworks are in fact absolute commodities in that they are a social product that has rejected every semblance of existing for society, a semblance to which commodities otherwise urgently cling, the determining relation of production, the commodity form, enters the artwork equally with the social force of production and the antagonism between the two. The absolute commodity would be free of the ideology inherent in the commodity form, which pretends to exist for-another, whereas ironically it is something merely for-itself: it exists for those who hold power. (P. 308)

In other words, the absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity because first, it detaches itself fully from the productive process of which it is the product, and second, because it has no use value whatsoever.9 The artwork is functionless, it does not communicate, we don’t know what it is, and not even why it exists: it is indeed, as Adorno notes, an enigma (Rätsel), therefore recalling Marx’s idea of the commodity as a ‘social hieroglyph’.
It is precisely the enigmatic character that is part of every genuine aesthetic experience, which makes such an experience into a model, one might say, for a non-dominative relationship to the world of things that resists identity thinking. Adorno writes: ‘Art stands as plenipotentiary for the in-itself that does not yet exist’ (p. 327). In other words, the aesthetic experience is exemplary for what a full experience might be in a society that is not dominated by functional relationships. Such a mode of relating to objects has an eye for the meaning inherent in the object itself, beyond the meaning the subject projects on it.

Adorno’s bête noire here is, as so often, the tradition of Idealism, which has dominated western thought since Descartes and Kant and, in his view, still comprises the work of Heidegger and Lukács, who pretend to have overcome it. The subject, as conceived by the Idealist system, is a ‘belly turned mind’, since it devours what comes in its path and leaves nothing of the integrity of what it is confronted with (Adorno, 1973, p. 23). As Kant tells us, intuitions are ‘blind’ unless they are subsumed under the categories of cognition. Sensuousness, in other words, has meaning only when this is granted to it by transcendental subjectivity, while the object is known only insofar as it can be manipulated: it is reduced to spiritual content. This reification of experience, Adorno argues, disfigures both the object and the subject. The object is conceived of as a fixed entity when it is being reduced to its conceptualization by a representing mind; the object’s particularity is destroyed through its subsumption under a priori schemas of knowledge. Consequently, however, the object also loses its ability to act as a source of human creativity and spontaneity. The subject, by consequence, loses its chance of encountering something new and different, something alien to itself, something that could alter the structures of its thought. The world becomes but a mirror of the subject itself. Hence, Adorno argues, philosophical idealism not only has a poor conception of experience, but eventually also cannot live up to its own claim of objectivity, since everywhere it looks it only sees itself (p. 120).

In Negative Dialectics Adorno gives a hint of what a full experience would look like: ‘If the thought really yielded to the object, if its attention were on the object, not on its category, the very objects would start talking under the lingering eye’ (pp. 27–28). Indeed, the experience of a work of art, which cannot be subsumed under a certain category, and has an enigmatic and non-reducible meaning of its own, is the model for such a way of relating to the world. However, Adorno argues in Aesthetic Theory that the work of art in turn is modelled after natural beauty. Again, Benjamin is not far away, and in the above quoted passage from Negative Dialectics one can
hear the echo of Benjamin’s definition of aura, as granting the object with the ability to return one’s gaze."

In the introduction I already mentioned how Adorno suggested in his letter to Benjamin that the concept of aura in fact refers to forgetfulness of human labour in the object (and hence to a kind of reification). In his reply Benjamin comes back to this, and writes the following:

But even if the question of the aura does in fact involve a ‘forgotten human moment’, this is still not necessarily the moment of human labour. The tree and the shrub which offer themselves to us are not made by human hands. There must therefore be something human in the things themselves, something that is not originated by labour. (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999, p. 327)

Benjamin, in other words, resists the hurried subsumption of his concept of aura under the theory of reification by Adorno, precisely because of its idealistic moment. Indeed, the imperative to consider everything within the ‘total social process’ stands in great tension with the demand of the object to be taken on its own, to consider it as a ‘sensuous particular’, to borrow a phrase of Jay Bernstein.

It is this tension that Adorno wants to keep intact in his later theory of experience, which is why he tries to redeem reification. Like Benjamin’s collector, Adorno takes the idea of reification to its extreme in order to redeem it: ‘Radicalized, what is called reification probes for the language of things. It narrows the distance to the idea of that nature that extirpates the primacy of human meaning’ (Adorno, 1997, p. 78). And indeed, in its very reification art paradoxically approaches the beauty of nature, not through imitation, but by being entirely in-itself, by bearing a enigmatic meaning that exceeds the meaning projected unto it by the subject: ‘Aesthetic objectivity, the reflection of the being-in-itself of nature, realizes the subjective teleological element of unity; exclusively thereby do artworks become comparable to nature’ (p. 100).

True reconciliation, in other words, does not mean bringing to light the ‘forgotten human element’ in nature, as Adorno suggests in his letter to Benjamin, but rather to acknowledge and emphasize the very alien and ‘inhuman’ character of nature, an inhuman moment that is also part of humanity itself. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno referred to this moment with their famous definition of mimesis as ‘remembrance of nature within the subject’, in which ‘enlightenment is opposed in principle to power’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 32)."
Only once the subject remembers that it is itself also part of nature, that it has been constituted in a dialectical relationship with nature instead of reducing nature entirely to itself, will it cease its destructive attempts to control nature in order to take away its fear from it. The dialectical ‘answer’ to the dialectic of enlightenment, then, is that only the subject’s acceptance of the impossibility of emancipating oneself from nature will allow it to interrupt the blind course of nature. This is what the dialectic of reification comprises.

5. Conclusion

Let us finally return to the problem raised in the introduction with the quote by Žižek, namely that Lukács’s critique of reification no longer suffices in a world where not rigidity but fluidity, flexibility, and change seem to be the main sources of alienation and discontent; i.e. the ideology that we are all happy nomads moving through the global network. Obviously, this is an all-too-easy critique of Lukács, if only for the fact that this is indeed mere ideology. It does show, however, how capitalism absorbs and encapsulates the very forms of critique that were traditionally directed against it.

Though Benjamin and Adorno’s dialectic of reification could perhaps not be a solution to this problem—for that, the problem is too complex—I believe that at least it might shield us against all too easy paens to fluidity, dynamics, or nomadism. Indeed, I think that contemporary trans- or post-humanists who preach the gospel of the network and speak of the blurring of boundaries between humans and non-humans might run the same risk as Lukács of relapsing into idealism. For these thinkers fail to acknowledge that while the distinction between subject and object may be ontologically flawed, it still is a historical reality, which one does not do away with as with a touch of a magic wand.

For Benjamin and Adorno the dialectic of reification means recognizing what Adorno calls the ‘primacy of the object’: yes, the object might be socially and historically constituted, but its meaning cannot and should not be reduced entirely to social relations. This very inscrutability of the object, its surplus of meaning beyond the subject’s reach, has a utopian moment, which makes it essential not only for aesthetic experience but also for a changed relation to the world. As Adorno formulates it in *Negative Dialectics*: ‘For there could no more be truth without a subject freeing itself from delusions than there could be truth without that which is not the subject, that in which truth has its archetype’ (Adorno, 1973, p. 375).
Bibliography


