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Negative Dialectics and the Aesthetic Redemption of the Postmodern Subject

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NEGATIVE DIALECTICS AND THE AESTHETIC REDEMPTION OF THE POSTMODERN

SUBJECT

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

the Department of Philosophy

of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Liberal Arts, with University High Honors

and Honors in Philosophy

by

Franklin Fehrman

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Foreword

This paper marks for me the culmination of ruminations that began with the study of Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, studies of Emile Durkheim's *anomie*, Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and ended with the emergence of a worldview that encompasses the current predicament faced by the postmodern individual. By investigating the construction of identity, and the rampant devaluation of traditional values in our current society, I thought there must be a common source; it has been the search for this source that has led me to this thesis over the last four years, perhaps, going back even farther. My time as student pursuing a philosophy degree exposed me to the works of philosophers that have given me the proper nomenclature and lexicon to be able to formulate this process of devaluation I see every day in society. As well, though, as I believe that individuals in the United States possess varying degrees of nihilism, I have faith that the individual will subscribe to valuations that empower, not hinder.

For to be honest, if one is to understand the power structure in the West as representing the vast multitude of subjects at the bottom, overseen by the very few at the top, and if power and its attendant, authority, do not come simply from the possession of money, then power must come in the form of either truth, freedom, authenticity and/or subscribing to traditional valuations already possessing the positive power of not only participation in them, but also, intrinsically, the historical legitimacy of culture and custom. This fact may not be entirely elucidated by the following work; instead, the impression may be that subjectively subscribed valuation is a source of "surrogate" power, or "the power of the powerless" as it exists for the

disenfranchised denizen at the bottom of the socio-economic power structure, a proposition I am hesitant to fully make. At least, though, through the aesthetic active participation of producing art, or the project of artful living, perhaps the individual may again approach truth, freedom, and authenticity.

Lastly, this work does not fully explore all the various angles and prescriptions for overcoming the disenfranchisement of universal commodification. Much of the work I did exploring this topic took me in the direction Nicholas Gane took in his work *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory*, whereby he used the sociological work of Max Weber and worked it out through three French postmodernists: Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Foucault. This current paper deviates from this approach, exploring the source of the nihilism through the phenomenological position of the German dialecticians. Though, in the future, I wish to explore the notions of Baudrillard's *erotic sphere*, and more specifically, how sex may correlate to aesthetic objects as perhaps objects that contain not only mystery, but also, perhaps negatively, the potential for danger and death; the dialectic relationship between *Eros* and *Thanatos* that may or may not correlate to creation or annihilation that exist together within mystery objects.

Franklin Fehrman

New Orleans, 2017

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Abstract

The last half of the twentieth century into the twenty-first century, in the West, has been referred to as postmodern. Postmodernity represents a stage in a society after having passed through a nihilism, itself produced by the universal commodification inherent in late stage capitalism. Here we explore the progress of devaluation through Adorno's negative dialectics to ascertain the potential for truth and authenticity in the object. Informing Adorno's negative dialectics, were Kant, Hegel, and Marx. Through their dialectics, Adorno postulated the effect of commodities, as objects, within the first part of the 20th century, and how the lack of potential for truth and freedom in these objects anticipated the nihilism of both the late capitalism period, into the postmodern period. This nihilism itself, was anticipated by Nietzsche. Further, this entire focus on and influence of commodities on the individual, from the early twentieth century to the present is referred to as the commodity structure and itself can be equated to Heidegger's *falling prey*. Once the subject has had the valuation or meaning of their lives stripped via this universal commodification of the commodity structure, this paper will argue through the works of Heidegger and Nietzsche and the role of the aesthetic, only then can the subject in the postmodern period reclaim *qua* participation in one's own *becoming* towards both truth and authenticity, as well as freedom.

Keywords: aesthetic, commodification, nihilism, negative dialectics, authenticity.

Introduction

In the last century, a shift to late stage capitalism has left the individual subject in a state of disillusionment and decline, due to an inherent nihilism via universal commodification. Contrary to the work of the eighteenth century German Idealists, such as Kant, Hegel and Marx, postmodern thinkers recognized that “the Enlightenment ‘project’ of liberating humanity from servitude and superstition had not only failed in its aims but had actually produced more powerful myths and even more absolute forms of domination” (Bennett 3). Specific to the work of Kant and Hegel is the relation between the subject and the object, what was referred to as a dialectical relation. The negative determination of Hegel, became the positive ascension of the individual, as Absolute Spirit, to the higher forms of culture and civilization. Later, it was Marx who had coined the ‘material dialectic’, placed across history that posited a final conflict that would end in Utopia, usurping the disenchanting capitalism blooming in the nineteenth century.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, though, the nature of capitalism began to take on a different role: “late capitalism should be seen less as a continuation of classical or monopoly capitalism than as a ‘different ‘order’ of commodification,’ and that this last order is itself only one among several processes of de-differentiation at work in postmodernity as a whole” (Miklitsch 80). This late capitalism became more and more revolved around the commodity, which took on the quality of structures; technological characteristics of mass production. For if the commodity itself could be referred to as an artificial object, as such, then the dialectic relation between subject and object would therefore change as well. This dialectic itself, as observed by Adorno, took the form of a *negative dialectic*; or a regression, or tension between the subject and the object. But the form itself is “anti-systematic” (Adorno 122); instead it should be seen as more of a method of critically analyzing the objects we encounter, for the potential of

truth and authenticity. This act itself is a form of intellectual freedom (Ibid. 84, 89). The subject, using negative dialectics, is able to ascertain that truth, freedom, and authenticity, do not exist in the commodity objects of the commodity structure, and must then create *art objects* to provide these qualities or must overcome their own *falling prey*-ness as the “objectified” subject and *become* authentic Beings.

The state of universal commodification “assimilates personal attributes, relations and desired states of affairs to the realm of objects by assuming that all human attributes are possessions bearing a value characterizable in money terms, and by implying that all these possessions can and should be separable from persons to be exchanged through the free market” (Radin 6), I would argue, bears a striking similarity to Heidegger’s mode of being, *falling prey*. Further, universal commodification is, in essence, the same thing as reification which “refers to the moment that a process or relation is generalized into an abstraction . . . [and] refers to the generation of a ‘phantom objectivity’, meaning that a human creation—an institution or an ideology, say—takes on the character of a ‘force that controls human beings’” (Bewes 3-4). We will associate this process of reification, and its consequences with the term commodity structure.

Once universal commodification alienates the relation between subject and object by changing the qualities of the objects encountered in the world of *artifice*, the subject is left unmoored from the potentialities of both truth and authenticity, as well as of freedom. The world of *artifice* is simply the world of man-made manufactured existence, not the natural world. This unmooring, existent in the *falling prey* of the commodity structure, turns into nihilism, as defined by Nietzsche in his *Will To Power*. This nihilism ultimately then becomes a choice for the subject in the commodity structure; does one be the *last man*, or the *Urbemensch*? For if the

object, given as commodity lacks the potentiality for truth and authenticity, via the prior concept of dialects, then one should seek or create objects that possess truth and authenticity, characteristics I would argue, are found in aesthetic objects. Further, participation in this choosing and creating of objects of truth and authenticity, I would argue, also resemble the same type of freedom intimated in Nietzsche's notion of *becoming*. Participation in authenticity also invokes Heidegger, who we will also explore. Needless to say, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Adorno all share the common stance, namely, that from the despair or *angst* that comes from living in a state of nihilism and inauthenticity arises the ground or starting point for authenticity as well as *becoming*.

In Part One, we will introduce the method of negative dialectics. To do this we will approach Adorno biographically, that is, how did he come to form the negative dialectics? We will start with the influence he received from his childhood tutor on Kant. We will see, then, how Hegel's Absolute Idealism and its "triadic" dialectic (Adorno 6) gave Adorno the framework to his negative dialectics. We will then explore how through its employment, the faults unmasked in both Kant and Hegel systems, helped him to develop his theory. We will then ask, "what is negative dialectics?", and further why is it an appropriate tool for our current critique?

In Part Two, we will explore the implications of commodification. We will start by examining Marx's commodity fetishism and how this aspect of earlier capitalism turned into the commodity structure of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. As well, we will explore four aspects of objects, Heidegger's "innerworldly things at hand" (Heidegger 1996: 103), or *objects at hand; commodities*, which we will define via Marx; *technology*, being a quality of late capitalistic *commodities*, and its implications on subject/object relations; and lastly, *art objects*. An important distinction must here be made that the objects we are concerned

with exist in the Greek term *nous*, or of human origin and not *per se* the *physis*, or natural world though obviously, nature provides all the *materia* for artificial objects. After delineating these four types of objects, we will describe their interrelation. After this, we will must define how the concepts of “truth” and “freedom” may be found in the object via the subject.

In Part Three, we will examine the correlation between the commodity structure and Heidegger’s *falling prey* and Nietzsche’s *nihilism*. As well, we will try to show how this nihilism characterized by the commodity structure nature of *falling prey* is produced by universal commodification. We will go into some detail of Heidegger’s *falling prey* in order to show how it ties into inauthenticity. This inauthenticity, I argue, is the predominant quality of participation in the commodity structure. As well, by showing the inauthenticity of the commodity structure, I intend in the following section to illustrate how authenticity may be achieved. By extrapolating on Nietzsche’s nihilism, we anticipate the ways in which through the active participation of *becoming*, the subject, already intimately doomed through the interrelation with the commodified object, may resurrect themselves.

In Part Four, we begin by readdressing the contemporary state of post-modernism and its implications. Then I will give my definition of *art object*, and explain how it satisfies a role of authenticity via Heidegger, as well as of truth. Approaching the *art object* via Nietzsche, we find similarities between the unintentional viewing of the object, and the *intoxication* necessary for the creation of the *art object*. This unintentionality is *contra* Husserl’s definition of intentionality, which we will explore in the first section. Further, after passing through nihilism, into the post-modern, the subject as object is faced with two choices, the first to continue to *fall prey*, and the second choice may well be referred to as the *art of living*. This *art of living*, is the

subject participating in itself as the *art object*, which represents the freedom of the subject in the postmodern period, parallel to Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch*.

Methodology and Assumptions

The approach taken throughout this work is postmodernist in its basic thrust, and much of the terminology reflects this. As well, many of the terms come from the phenomenological and German idealist tradition. Therefore, the following terms are here defined for the reader to obtain some clarity:

Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics is the approach to objects encountered whereby the positive appearance *negatively* reveals what it does not show. An example comes from Maurice Merleau-Ponty whereby the angle one view a glass, negatively provides that there is the side one does not see.

“Constellation of Construction”: This term comes from the work of Walter Benjamin and means that objects hold within them ideas and or facts about the reality that constructed them.

Intentionality: This term comes from Edmund Husserl and regards the conscious and purposeful viewing of an object or one of its facets so as to allow it to be more well understood.

Sublimation: Sublimation is the conscious act of categorizing an object rationally thus consciously bounding the object, and at the same time, actively intertwining oneself with the reality of the object.

Factic/Factically: This is a Heideggerian phrase simply implying the reality of the subject and the world one inhabits.

They-self: A Heideggerian term meaning other subjects existent in our lives who inform and consensually manufacture the given world to us.

Falling Prey: A Heideggerian term meaning the act of participating in the consensually manufactured, inauthentic world of the They-self.

Angst: A Heideggerian term that is equitable to a moment of uncertainty experienced by the individual if and when they begin to question the authenticity of the given world of the They-self.

Negative Dialectics: A dialectical exercise utilized by the individual to repurpose the more traditional dialectic relationship between the subject and the object whereby the truth and progress is not given by a triadic thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectic. The third term, representing an apex to the first two, the synthesis is denied and the dialectic relationship between the subject and object is analyzed by the thinking subject whereby either the object reveals hermeneutically that which it is not displaying, or the consciousness sees the subject and object relationship and then seeks hermeneutically truth, freedom, and authenticity in the negative space between the two. As well, the dialectical relationship itself can be stepped back from and seen in a detached manner whereby the dialectic relationship itself *negatively* reveals positivistic truth, freedom and authenticity.

Reification: Similar to sublimation and the “constellation of construction”, whereby the object represents concretized thought and/or social and cultural reality.

Da-sein: The individual or subject.

Being-in/of-the-world: The reality consensually constructed by others implying a participatory role.

Phenomenology: The practice systemizing existence via the empirically observed phenomena thus experienced by the subject.

Encompassed: Similar to sublimation, this term means to consciously encompass an object or event.

Aesthetics: The field of thought in pursuit of art and its relationship to bigger ideas such as beauty and truth.

Part One: Negative Dialectics

In order to understand the negative dialectics of Adorno, it is important to understand the general positive positions of the main dialecticians that informed him; Kant and Hegel. We will also need to explain the purpose for utilizing Adorno's *negative dialectics* at all, specifically how it uses hermeneutics, mimetics and thus, how it may provide the truth and freedom of the object.

In the first place, we must begin by understanding Kant's influence on Adorno. "In 1918-1919, while Germany was reeling from military defeat and political upheaval, the fifteen-year-old Adorno studied music and spent his weekend hours reading Kant" (Buck-Morss 2). This influence on Adorno, had the original effect of instilling in him the Kantian notion that "we cannot *know* these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in position at least to *think* them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears" (Kant 27). This also ties into Kant's famous Copernican Revolution, whereby Adorno "reversed the polarity of the relation between subject and object, [and] gave, as he later worded it [the] 'Copernican Revolution an axial turn,' so that nonidentity became the very basis of knowledge" (Buck Morss 83). The Copernican Revolution of Kant was famous for turning the philosopher's attention away from the object's influence on the subject and analyzing the conceptual categorization and mutual interdependence of the thinking subject with the object. As well, Adorno's earlier Kantian teachings also provided him with the necessary conflict between subject and object:

If later, in regard to the traditional philosophical texts, I not so much let myself be impressed by their unity and systematic coherence as I concerned myself with the play of opposing and conflicting forces which [go] on under the surface of every self-

contained theoretical position, and which codified philosophy sometimes accounts for as force-field, then it was certainly Kracauer [ed. *his tutor*] who gave me the idea. He made the *Critique of Pure Reason* present to me not simply as a system of transcendental idealism. Much more, he showed me . . . how the most eloquent parts of the work are the **wounds which the conflict in the theory** leaves behind. (Buck-Morss 80)

To be sure, the breaks he found in the works of Kant were between the phenomena and the noumena; the concept and the reality. Yet, later, in his use of the “monadical abbreviations” or “constellations of constructions” (ibid. 112, 176) deciphered through the mimetic, hermeneutical nature of the negative dialectic, which we will address later, Adorno was able to solve the “riddle of the idealists” from the standpoint of treating the subject and object, together as “inextricably bound” (ibid. 112) elements thereby reflecting the two under the reified relationship of the commodity structure; negating the dialectal question altogether in the favor of seeking the antinomies residing in whatever system he applied this negative gaze at, as well as finding the negative relationship between the dialectic itself and consciousness in a negative space.

We will now address the influence of Hegel on Adorno’s thinking. For starters, Hegel’s logic consists of a triadic relationship between the subject and the object, instigating a third phase, that represents the synthesis, thereby informing the next progressed level’s thesis or subjective position. In a sense, the relation between the two facilitates the revealing of the subject to itself through encountering the object. Further, Hegel’s logic is mapped across history, whereby the pinnacle of the dialectic represents a return of Spirit to itself represented in

nineteenth century German civilization. The level's rise from the subject through the object, lays the foundation to higher levels of relations, up through familial relations, to the instance of society and civilization up to higher forms of human achievement in the forms of culture, philosophy, and religion.

Specifically, important to Hegel's dialectic is the negative nature of the subject, or the determinant nature of the subject:

. . . this idea is that the subject, which as thinking subject criticizes given institutions, represents the first instance the emancipation of the spirit. And, as the emancipation of the spirit, it represents the decisive transition from its mere being-in-itself to a being-for-itself. In other words, the stage that has been reached here is one in which spirit confronts objective realities, social realities . . . this subjectivity is a mere aspect that has turned self into an absolute; it overlooks the fact that it owes its own substance, its forms, its very existence to the objective forms and existence of society; and that it actually becomes conscious of itself by conceiving of the seemingly alien and even repressive institutions as being like itself, by comprehending them as subjective and perceiving them in their necessity. (Adorno 14)

Adorno is trying to depart from the Idealist aspect of Hegel's system. Specifically, the function by which Hegel uses determinant negation of the subject to create a positive, affirming system. Further, he repurposes this negation found in Hegel from the relation between subject and object, and as mentioned in the above section on Kant, after denying the original dialectical question of

subject/object, he then uses this negative approach of the philosopher to negatively reveal the truth, freedom and thence authenticity in the negative space between the subject and object. That is, the original dialectic between subject and object was part of the process, as Hegel had termed it, of a determinant negation in a *positive* fashion. Adorno saw the negative aspect *itself* as the process whereby truth and freedom would be revealed to a thinking subject: “The negativity I am speaking about contains a pointer to what Hegel calls *determinate* negation. In other words, negativity of this kind is made concrete and goes beyond mere standpoint philosophy by confronting concepts with their objects, and, conversely, objects with their concepts. Negativity *in itself*, if such a concept were not nonsensical—since by virtue of its being in itself, a concept that exists essentially only in context, i.e. *for others*, turns into its own opposite” (Adorno 25).

Before discussing the negative dialectics as a tool for subject approaching the object, and the similarities between hermeneutics and the relation to mimetics, we must explain that for Adorno history had proven itself as not positive, and that the Enlightenment promise of reason being the salvation for humanity had obviously failed, evidenced by the use and shadow of the atomic bomb, and the instance of the Holocaust in the West. Therefore, if truth and freedom were no longer found in the dialectical systems of Hegel and Marx, then what was the access point for the subject to attain truth and notions of freedom. We are not including authenticity here, because we will need to address in the following section how the commodity structure relates to the notion of *falling prey*, and how the objects found in late capitalistic countries are such that through their *inauthenticity*, they breed nihilism. This will allow for a more thorough conversation on *authenticity*.

As I mentioned, the negative dialectics utilizes hermeneutics and mimetics. Hermeneutics is utilized extensively in existential philosophers such as Sartre, as well as phenomenological

thinkers such as Heidegger and Paul Ricouer. Hermeneutics is the idea that “every understanding lights up its objects only against a background that cannot at the same time be brought into the light” (Melchert G-3). Put another way, it may be said that the interpretation of the object itself reveals unnoticed truths, tacitly contained in the factic nature of the subject, revealed by the object. This also relates to mimetics, whereby “visibly ‘given’ objects were translated into terms of nonvisible social process” whereby the elements revealed concepts not in a synthetic sense, but that the phenomena “illuminated contradictions” (Buck-Morss 102).

Another important aspect of the negative dialectics, which we will bring back up later is the way that art and aesthetics are an important remedy to postmodern nihilism, through the notion of unintentionality. In fact, this unintentionality informs the basis of truth found in objects. If we can understand that for Husserl, intentionality was a requisite for the bracketing off of objects for phenomenological hermeneutics, for Adorno, the unintentionality found in the negative space between the subject and object revealed the mimetic nature of both the subject and the object. Here, Adorno’s great friend Walter Benjamin explains:

Truth never enters into a relation, and particularly not an intentional one. The object of knowledge as something determined within conceptual intention is not truth. Truth, built out of ideas [rather than appearing within them], is unintentional being. The procedure which adequately conforms to it is therefore not an intending within the knowing process, but entering into [truth] and disappearing. Truth is the death of intention. (Buck-Morss 77)

Put another way, for Adorno the potentiality for truth was not given by the object, but requires the thinking subject to interpret, albeit and mystically, unintentionally.

The ability of the subject to interpret represents a form of autonomy and freedom we made mention of earlier when we posited that the negative relation provides truth and freedom. For the subject exists in a social world consensually constructed, a constitution of our being. But this constitution is given to us by the commodity structure. Put another way, the givenness of Heidegger's *They-self* in a state of *falling prey*. By approaching the object unintentionally, we secure knowledge and truth, and the speculative subject attains a greater understanding both of the illusory nature of the givenness of the world, and *negatively*, the conscious overcoming of this state of being. This differentiation between "socially necessary illusion" (Adorno 100) and the active form of enquiry, or *resistance*, as Adorno refers to the practice of philosophy, "transcends the objects while remaining closely in touch with them" (ibid 107). And where our thoughts, confronted by objects, reach a depth that leaves some thoughts uncategorized and *new*, "[t]his speculative surplus that goes beyond whatever is the case, beyond mere existence, is the element of freedom in thought, and because it is, because it alone does stand for freedom, because it represents the tiny quantum of freedom we possess, it also represents the *happiness* of thought" (ibid. 108)

The purpose of this section has been to demonstrate what the negative dialectic is in a very brief fashion. What has been important, has been to illustrate that the dialectic itself represents a novel turn from the subject/object relation inherent in the works of Hegel as well as the way in which it may be used to attain truth and freedom from the object, in general. Just as important is that this dialectical illustration represents an active confrontation of the subjects consciousness with the negative space existent between subject and object, and thus consciousness with the dialectic in general. This negative aspect will be important later in the section on aesthetics, by way of both Heidegger and Nietzsche. Further, the negative relation to

the dialectics of the subject/object, frees the subject from the inauthentic aspect of the object as commodity encountered to a greater extent in the world. In the next section, we are going to explore commodity structure that has developed at the turn of the nineteenth century, and continued up until the present.

Part Two: The Object as Commodity

The purpose of this section deviates from the discussion of negative dialectics in order to explain the types of objects encountered in late capitalistic countries. The other purpose is to provide the ground by which we may illustrate and prove the nihilism that follows from universal commodification which makes up the commodity structure, or, the factic matrix of late capitalistic countries. Lastly, we need to illustrate how this crucial quality of the commodity structure breeds nihilism so that we may come to a post-nihilistic order in the guise of post-modernity and the salvation of the subject in the last part.

It is important here to delineate the nuanced differences between what we mean by objects encountered in the world. This list is not all encompassing, nor does it pretend to be exhaustive; it is an attempt to categorize objects given at once in the world and the potential quality thus found for truth and freedom for the subject. This important and will lead us to the final section, on the aesthetic potential for freedom and authenticity. For now, we will describe the types of objects most commonly encountered, and then how reification informs the commodity structure and how this commodity structure objectifies the subject. As well, we must reiterate that these are objects of *artifice*, not of nature.

The first type of object is a category for objects that I am borrowing from Heidegger's concept of "things" such that they exist neutrally as objects that populate our existence. I will refer to them as *objects at hand*, and they imply a degree of utility. This borrowing from Heidegger does not intend on including his notion of a totality of worldly things (Heidegger 1996: 62-71), and is not meant for our purposes to indicate those objects that Heidegger used in his phenomenological enterprise *Being and Time* as an initial interfacing of Dasein factically with the being-of-the-world. Though, similarly to our position, one might argue that once we have explained the relationship

between reification and the commodity structure, and the commodity structure to *falling prey* one might be tempted to make greater comparisons. For now, I will say that these *objects at hand* have the non-spectacular quality of being consciously *encompassed* (Jaspers 227-228). What this means is that consciously the subject has already overcome or delimited the potentiality for the object to transcend its own parameters of being; that is, the subject overcomes the object consciously and anticipates its horizons, not to be exceeded. Further, these *objects at hand* tend to always have the quality of fungibility, a characteristic of commodities (Radin 118). Fungibility is the property of goods to be mutually transferable, one to the other mostly through the medium of capital. Lastly, there exists an initial novelty for the being of these *objects at hand* when they start as a commodity, which gradually digresses into a habitual taken-for-grantedness.

The second type of object is the commodity. We find in Marx's *Capital*: "The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs whether they arise from the stomach or the imagination, makes no difference" (Marx 125). For our purposes, we should think of the commodity as an object instantly *encompassed*. That is, when the subject sees the commodified object the subject itself has already arrested the potentiality for the object as commodity to be overcome. Margaret Radin uses "four indicia of commodification in conceptualization": 1) objectification, 2) fungibility, 3) commensurability and 4) money equivalence (Radin 118). Commodity represents an object that will greatly inform our further discussion on the commodity structure and its implications. Lastly, commodified objects, or objects with a monetary value, make up nearly every artificial environment that Western subject finds themselves in.

Thirdly, is the *object of technology*, itself a commodity with the quality of enrapturing the subject by way of guile and glamour. Put another way, technology, as object, is instantly

encompassed as an object, and thus, can pass into the taken-for-grantedness of an *object at hand* in the sense of hammer or a calculator. It also has the potentiality to remain novel in that *objects of technology* act as platforms for an endless stream of content or novel media. Technology has the potential of suspending the subject within the commodity structure, arresting his or her transcendence by disallowing the interpretative action of seeing the relation between subject/object within the negative space of unintentionality. Further, as the subject becomes more enamored with more consciously immersive forms of technology, the subject sinks further into its own reified existence, thus denying the inherent freedom I referred to earlier, potentialized in the object, as such. Adorno refers to this tendency of technology as a form of fascism in his *Minima Moralia*: “Technology is making gestures precise and brutal and with them men . . . The movements machines demand of their users already [has the] violent, hard-hitting, unresting jerkiness of Fascist maltreatment. Not the least to blame for the withering of experience is the fact that things, under the law of pure functionality, assume a form that limits contact with them to mere operation and tolerates no surplus, either in *freedom* [emphasis mine] of conduct or in [the] autonomy of things, which would survive as the core of experience, because it is not consumed by the moment of action” (Buck-Morss 181).

The last object, I posit, is the *art object*. The *art object* is what I will be exploring in the last section of this work and I will define its parameters then. For now, I will say that the *art object* has the quality of immediately not being overcome. As well, in the fact that it cannot be encompassed, it also stands as an object that allows for the necessary observation of the negative space before intimated. We will see later, how this negative space relates to Nietzsche’s intoxication. Further, as the subject itself increasingly becomes objectified and therefore

commodified, the redemptory path of the subject in post-modern times becomes an active form of nihilism and then to *becoming*; the subject takes on the quality of an *art object*.

The relation between the objects is such that: a) all commodities are artificial and represent an objectification, as such; b) all *objects of technology* are commodities; c) no *art objects* are either *objects at hand*, nor *commodities*; d) *objects at hand* are almost always commodities, though, if they start as *art objects* (such as, for example, an “artisanal hammer”, or a handmade pen), they eventually lose their quality of not being *encompassed* and fall into taken-for-grantedness; e) *art objects*, in the very fact that they cannot be commodities and thus do not participate in the commodity structure, possess authenticity, and this authenticity, as a quality, can never be diminished; and lastly f) *objects at hand* do not necessarily possess, by way of their utility, the quality of *inauthenticity* per se, but if they formerly existed as *commodities* and not as artisanal *objects at hand*, they can never possess the quality of authenticity.

One of the most important turns for this argument comes from understanding how the reification of objects into commodities comes to create the commodity structure. The answer comes from Georg Lukacs:

The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole. Only in this context does the **reification produced by commodity relations** [emphasis mine] assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it. Only then does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men’s consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression and for their attempts to comprehend the

process or to rebel against its disastrous effects and liberate themselves from servitude to the 'second nature' so created. (Lukacs 86)

The 'second nature' Lukacs refers to is the permeating acceptance and reinforcement of the status quo and participatory reinforcement of "universal commodification" (Radin 2-6), or the commodification of everything.

We need to understand two important implications: 1) capitalism has created within countries that practice it a commodity structure through reification. This is a factic reality simply by observing the ubiquitous nature of commodities, *objects of technology*, and *objects at hand* in our everyday lives. Further, these three categories of objects all lack the immediate quality of an intoxicating negative space. That is, by the very nature of our subjective entanglement with them in our own constitution of *falling prey*, they represent objects that do not possess the potential as objects for the subject to acquire truth or freedom as defined above. Therefore, existence in the commodity structure for those in the First World countries is defined by a lack of truth, freedom as well as authenticity.

The second implication develops from the first, namely that as this time period we are living in is referred to as late capitalism. In this era, we could say the universal commodification has reached its pinnacle. In a negative sense, the commodification of objects, events and traditional forms of valuation has actually *devalued* their actual worth. Therefore, lacking the proper access to value, as well as truth, freedom and authenticity, the subject is left to manufacture meaning, pastiche-ing together identity and meaning from commodities. This further reiterates the negative position of Adorno, that there has not been an ascent, historically, but indeed, a descent. For, in contrast to the positive dialectics of both Marx and Hegel, peoples in capitalistic countries,

specifically First World countries in the late capital stage, have become moored in the *falling prey*-ness of the commodity structure and have had their former achievements, accurately described by Hegel as culture, religion, the family, philosophy, and art devalued, replaced, and/or commodified.

Up until now, we have used the term late capitalism without giving a proper definition. But having now explained the relation between reification, commodification and how both inform and have produced the commodity structure, we can now lay out what late capitalism is. The commodity structure of late capitalism “should be seen less as a continuation of classical or monopoly capitalism than as a’ different ‘order’ of commodification,’ and that this last order is itself only one among several processes of differentiation at work in postmodernity as a whole” (Miklitsch 80). We will explore postmodernity more in the last part on the aesthetic redemption.

This leads us to our next part: nihilism. The position I take is that nihilism is the inevitable consequence of the negative valuation via commodification. Further, the subject, entangled with the object of commodity, begins to apply commodity valuation to himself, thus *devaluing* him or herself. The nihilism comes from the lack of truth, freedom and authenticity the subject seeks, and yet does not find in the majority of objects found in the commodity structure of a late capitalistic existence. As well this nihilism acts in tandem with the *falling prey* aspect of the factic reality of existence in those places. So, we will explore Heidegger’s *falling prey*, as well as Nietzsche’s nihilism. The goal is such that by exposing that we exist to a greater and greater extent in a nihilistic existence, we may only then, by accepting our reality, work at creating meaning and valuation in our lives aesthetically.

Part Three: Commodity Structure *Falling Prey*-ness and Nihilism

In this section, we will begin by showing the similarities between Heidegger's conception of *falling prey* and the commodity structure. This concept of *falling prey* also informs the idea of *inauthenticity*. Further, we will show the similarities between the devaluation of values inherent in universal commodification and Nietzsche's nihilism. These two philosophers will also inform the redemptive nature of the aesthetic in final section, and therefore are even more pertinent to our discussion. Lastly, it is important to understand that nihilism marks a transitory phase in the progress of capitalism to late capitalism and thence to post-modernity, and occurs sometime between classical capitalism and late capitalism. Once nihilism has set in, this informs post-modernity, but not after.

In the first place, we are going to explore how Heidegger's *falling prey*, as a structural development of Da-sein's being as care, works in tandem with the commodity structure. *Falling prey* also perpetuates reification and both inform the nature of the commodity structure of late capitalism and "take on the character of 'a force that controls human beings'" (Bewes 3-4). Reification is the process by which the commodity structure supports conformity with its given valuations. Contrast the definition of reification just given to that of *falling prey*. *Falling prey* is a constitution of being-in-the-world, a form of participation, that is defined also as *entanglement* (Heidegger 1996: 164) Through the idle talk with others (the "They", or other people existing in and amongst us in our "fallen" state of inauthentic existence), pure curiosity bereft of understanding, and the ambiguity by which authentic objects, such as the event of dying are informed by others. The principle characteristic of *falling prey*, as it pertains to our current work, is the givenness of the world via universal commodification.

Another important consideration of *falling prey* is that it is not limited to late capitalist countries. The “They” that informs the subject (Dasein) is contingent on the factic reality of the specific time and culture of the specific country one is in. Let me put it another way. As a constitution of the being of the subject, *falling prey* relates to the way the subject takes for granted notions, or in our case, objects in the form of commodities, in such a way that the very makeup of the individual becomes synonymous with the World as informed by the They-self. The example Heidegger gives is that we build within ourselves the notion of death given by the They-self. But the problem occurs because the individual understands that the if he or she does not understand death as a potentiality that has not yet occurred, then neither has anyone else and thereby contains within it the seeds of its own undermining. To understand how this translates to our treatment, we need to consider the next important quality of Heidegger’s *falling prey*.

Heidegger also relates the *falling prey* of the They-self with the quality of informed perceptions given, as being inherently *inauthentic*. That is, the individual who lives according to the consensual givenness of the They-self is in effect living *inauthentically*, because he or she is ultimately accepting what is given from others without pursuing truth or freedom, qualities that would be possessed in one who was creating their own authentic existence through active participation. This is an important point, and again, one that anticipates Nietzsche’s redemptive participation of aesthetic becoming. Further, we understand that *falling prey*, as a mode of existence is a preliminary to *angst* (Heidegger 1992: 156-204). *Angst*, in the same way as Adorno’s hermeneutics and mimetics, or his *physiognomy*, allows for the unconcealing of truth in the object. For *angst* seems to represent a negative moment of revealing of the inauthentic nature of given objects of the They-self. Adorno uses no such method to alleviate the *angst* of the individual faced with the inauthenticity of the “object” thus given; for him, the *physiognomy* allowed the thinking

subject to behold the object such to reveal “constellations of constructions” (Buck-Morss 176) embedded in the object. The important point here, though, is that the givenness of the They-self nearly completely parallels the inauthenticity of the “objects” given by the commodity structure.

Heidegger’s schema is important to understand the character of the commodity culture of late capital countries and how it behaves. As well, Heidegger’s notion of *falling prey* is not itself a malevolent force; a part of its dynamic is its function as everydayness towards the world *whichever world that may be for the subject*. For our purposes, the world we are describing is late capitalism via commodity structure and reification, which themselves have negative effects on the subject. The way that the subject is informed in a state of *falling prey*, as commodity structure, bleeds into the individual making them vulnerable as the subject then starts to associate themselves with the object: “objectification comes about through commodification when our cultural rhetoric conceives of certain attributes of the person [in much the same way] as commodities that can be bought and sold” (Radin 156). Thus, “objectification can be internalized; as, for example, when women conceive of themselves some aspects as sex objects for men’s use. Personhood is compromised from within as well as from without” (ibid. 157). Here, we may interchangeably take the word “personhood” and interchangeably use it with the word “identity”. The implications of this will become clear for us in Nietzsche’s becoming. The last point here is that the process of subjective objectification becoming commodification is a subjective process and saturates individuals to varying degrees.

The last point I will make about Heidegger’s *falling prey* constitution and how it informs the quality of givenness of the current commodity structure is how it informs *inauthenticity*, and thereby negatively unconceals *authenticity*. In other words, if it wasn’t for the very nature of *inauthenticity*, and thereby the general relationship of the informing “They” and the subject, we

wouldn't be able to recognize that the nature of what is given, in this case objects of commodity, are inherently without *authenticity*. Further, by recognizing that the nature of commodification thus undermines the valuation of values through objectification, we may understand that the subject themselves participate in the process of becoming *inauthentic*. As we will see in the next section on aesthetics, the work itself is for the subject to create or produce either *art objects*, or as an already *fallen* objectified subject, the subject needs to participate in their own self-*becoming*.

Nietzsche speaks of nihilism in two distinct ways that we may use to inform our current study. The first occurs, explicitly, in his *Will to Power*. The second example, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, needs a little translation. In the former, as an explicit call to action, we understand how Nietzsche's nihilistic bent of philosophy has much in common with Adorno, Heidegger, and the other existentialists: that the subject must indeed lose or have annihilated that which held value prior such that this ground level becomes the "worthless[ness] of the ground of creation" (Rosen 199) whereby the subject must either "actively or reactively" (Rampley 218) choose his own way towards freedom and *becoming*.

Again, to reiterate my claim, this process itself, of pursuing a renewed relation between subject and object that has the negative space potential in the dialectical schema reclaiming truth, freedom and authenticity, represents a phase that comes after the capitalistic quality of universal commodification. This was the situation in Europe and the United States from the late eighteenth century, accelerating exponentially through the twentieth century until today, evolving into a post-nihilistic phase that is aptly referred to as post-modernity.

As Nietzsche himself was writing in the late eighteen hundreds, he was cognizant of this potential trend, and in *The Will to Power*, we find the most explicit expressions of it. Firstly, Nietzsche recognizes that "European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a

tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade” (Nietzsche 1967: 3). Tied directly to this opening to his work is exactly the sentiment earlier stated, “For why has the advent of nihilism become *necessary*? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequence; because nihilism represents the logical conclusion of our great values and ideals—because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what these ‘values’ really had.—We require, sometime, *new values*” (ibid. 4). As well, Nietzsche affirms my previous postulate, that nihilism represents a phase that capitalistic countries must pass through, as a consequence, for the “highest values devalue[ing] themselves” (ibid. 8). Of this prerequisite phase, Nietzsche writes: “[N]ihilism represents a pathological stage . . . [where the subject finds] . . . that there is no truth, that there is no absolute nature of things nor a ‘thing-in-itself’ . . . It places the value of things precisely in their lack of any reality corresponding to these values” (ibid. 14). The important point to make here is that this aptly coincides with the negative space found between commodified objects and the thinking subject *a la* Adorno and Heidegger. As we will see in the next section, this negative space represents a place of intoxication where art may flourish.

The second place where Nietzsche intimates nihilism, and where he begins to prescribe the way in which, in our study, the objectified subject, may participate in *becoming*, differentiated by notions of the *last man* and the *Übermensch*, is in his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. As mentioned, the time period that Nietzsche lived in, with its increased alienation, a symptom of universal commodification, was already weakening the girders of traditional valuation. This devaluation of valuation and metaphysical concepts stemmed from the “death of God” (Milchman and Rosenberg 47). Once we had these former metaphysical valuations, we could either accept the givenness of the *inauthentic*, nihilistic objects of the commodity structure, or actively pursue our own valuations; the former referring to the *last man* and reactive nihilism, and the latter referring to the

Übermensch, or active nihilism. “The hallmark of passive [reactive] nihilism, for Nietzsche, is ‘. . . a will to nothingness, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life’” (Ibid 48), taking on the characteristics of “complacency, happiness, contentment, and indifference”.

This *almost* state of the *last man*, almost perfectly mirrors the individual participating in the world of the They-self through the incorporation of objects of inauthenticity, or objects devoid of truth and freedom. In the next section, we will explore Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s notions of art, and the way in which the negative space postulated by Adorno is the source for the intoxication requisite for *art objects*. As well, we will explore the active participation required by both thinkers to overcome the givenness of *inauthentic* existence.

Part Four: Postmodernity and the Aesthetic Redemption of the Subject

In this section, we will refer back to Adorno's negative dialectics from the first part, as a function for ascertaining the truth and freedom in the object, requisite for authentic existence of the subject. In Part Two and Three we tried to show that the time period of the early twentieth century, made a turn towards universal commodification having the explicit effect of creating a state of givenness, participation therein creating a state of nihilism and the objectification of the subject. To qualify this statement, it may perhaps be easier to understand that this nihilism is not as severe and overwhelming and yet still possesses an anomic and alienating quality. In fact, we just described the state as one of "complacency, happiness, contentment, and indifference" as well, relating the commodity structure to the *falling prey* of Heidegger, we get an added definition via Heidegger of that of "tranquillization": "This tranquillization in inauthentic being . . . [causes the subject to drift] toward an alienation in which its own potentiality for being-in-the-world is concealed" (Heidegger 1992: 166). In other words, an artificial happiness.

It is here important to understand how and what postmodernity is. It represents a specific time period: "Marxists and non-Marxists alike have come around to the feeling that at some point following World War Two, a new kind of society began to emerge (variously described as post-industrial society, multinational capitalism, consumer society, media society and so forth). New types of consumption; planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television, and the media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society [*ed. See: objects of technology*]" (Jameson 1998: 19). Further, Terry Eagleton writes that post-modernism represents a time period where exists a "degree of skepticism about the objectivity of truth . . . [and that] springs from the historic shift

in the West to a new form of capitalism—to the ephemeral, decentralized, world of technology, consumerism and the culture industry” (Eagleton 1996: vii).

In the postmodern ethos, we are bereft of any former guideposts of culture or valuation, and are left to manufacture surrogate values with little to no historical precedent. Postmodern milieu represents the moment where the Western individual finds themselves after they have passed through and are existing in commodity structure, *falling prey* state of either passive or active nihilism. Further, it represents a point where the construction of valuation comes from the curative of aesthetic of creating an *art object*, or through the process of *becoming* an art object.

Approaching redemption in this area requires that we find within an *art object*, by way of its negative space it possesses by not being immediately *encompassed*, the truth or freedom that I elucidated earlier. This redemptive nature of the *art object*, equitable with Adorno’s general notion of aesthetics is one that “retrieve[s] that which had been lost by the ideological preeminence of the subject of bourgeois philosophy in both its Enlightenment-rational and romantic irrational forms . . . [using] ‘negative dialectics’, the subject retained contact with the object appropriating it” (Buck-Morss 132). To put it another way, we seek an object in the *art object* such that it acts in a non-conceptual semblance that would disallow it from falling victim to the intentionality of the artist; the *art object* flees the conceptualization that would thereby “devalue” (Adorno 94) it.

Here we will revisit our earlier discussion of the types of objects, specifically the *art object*. My position is that the *art object* has certain specific criteria. 1) it may be anything crafted by a person, with the intention of each piece being non-identical to any other of the same kind, 2) the crafting of the piece by the subject must involve some potential for failure, 3) the object crafted should represent a form *not-to-be-overcome* rationally, and should aim at being a

“surrogate” and yet *authentic* form of existential crises for the artist, and preferably to the audience; 4) the intention of the artist cannot primarily be for any material gains; 5) the artist must have developed some mastery of their craft prior to accomplishing the work; 6) the object crafted, itself must carry the potential to convey truth and freedom to perhaps not only the artist who crafted it, but as well, to any other subject through its creation in a state of unintentional or unencompassed *intoxication*; the greater the work of art, the more universal this quality is. This last criteria is in direct response to Adorno’s negative dialectics, and represents the key to the salvation of the subject living in post-modernity in truth, freedom, and authenticity. There is one main caveat to the above definition of art: namely, that the relation between subject and object is one of *entanglement* such that the *entanglement* itself has the inherent relation to the commodity structure. Therefore, the *art object* itself is informed and takes shape via the facticity of the present, and yet stands for the freedom of creation, and produces an authenticity that mirrors the authentic becoming of the subject.

As I mentioned before, the moment of authenticity prerequisites an *inauthentic falling prey*-ness of the subject. In Heidegger, we have already described how the being-in-the-world, for us, represents the commodity structure and gives commodities for us ready-made. We also spelled out how this being in the commodity structure is part of our constitution, or facticity, informing our existence; for commodities, unlike *art objects*, are themselves *inauthentic*, and our participating in them precludes our own level and degree of *inauthentic* Being. Further, the They-self, aware of this nihilistic deficiency in authenticity seeks to tempt us with commodities wearing the “skins” of authenticity (Miklitsch 72).

We may think of an Urban Outfitter selling a new t-shirt with a traditional Navajo print, itself a commodity with the “skin” of authenticity, where truly the “body” or essence of the garb

reflects not the deceptive meaning, but lies ciphered in a “constellation of construction” whereby the entire commodity culture itself may be revealed. In this way, commodity is able to brand itself, pretending to be what it is not. And by the way of identifying with the given object of inauthenticity prevailing in our society, then, it follows that the subject will much more readily find truth in making one’s own *art object*, thereby actively participating in one’s own authenticity. Further, “in the work, the happening of truth is at work” (Heidegger 2008: 183), and this “unconcealment . . . [of our own being] puts us into such a condition of being that in our representation we always remain installed within and in attendance upon unconcealment” (ibid. 177). Therefore, the process of creating *art objects* at once unconceals the factic reality of not only nihilism, but also produces authentic objects that come from freedom also possess the mystery of negative space.

If in Heidegger’s concept of the *art object*, we attain to descriptions of truth and authenticity, we look now at Nietzsche and first his relation to art, and then to his notion of the *Übermensch* as aesthetic prescriptions for redemption of the subject through *becoming an art object*.

How we can relate Nietzsche’s notion of the aesthetic to Adorno’s dialectic involves Nietzsche’s description of art: “For art to exist, for any sort of aesthetic activity or perception to exist, a certain physiological precondition is indispensable: intoxication. Intoxication must first have heightened the excitability of the entire machine: no art results before that happens” (Rambley 219). This intoxication mirrors almost precisely what Adorno spoke of earlier of a seeming unintentional, immanently perceived, non-conceptual participation with the object, as such that it happens in a near lightening moment of play, that comes from the confrontation of just such an object-not-to-be-overcome. This potential of an *art object* contrasts in kind from the

sort of objectivized object, and the objectified subject, that represents the objects complete lack of freedom, both for itself and the subject. For Nietzsche, art is epitomized in the guise of Dionysus, and the latter the reified object, the visage of the Greek god Apollo. The former relates to this intoxication, the latter, to the dream (Nietzsche 2012: 83).

Lastly, the prescriptive remedy for the state of postmodernity, we find in the mode of being for the subject as a *falling prey*, or an “objectified”, commodified subject, the act of freedom requires an active working or creating. What Nietzsche prescribes is an active form of nihilism represented by the *Übermensch*. This “active nihilism can open up the space for the re-valuation of values, for what we will designate a transfiguration, a project of self-fashioning” (Milchman and Rosenberg 48). Nietzsche as well equates these subjects who can live in resolved, active nihilism as “‘free spirits,’ ‘a spirit that has *become free*, that has again taken possession of itself,’ to affect a self-overcoming of what he designated as Christian-Platonic man, with its basis in the ascetic ideal, and thus to overcome the metaphysical need, and to give rise to the creation of new values” (Ibid. 49). The *Übermensch* thus stands as the individual, “who can live in a world without meaning,” (Ibid) and thus, actively participates in the becoming of themselves.

In these two ways, the construction of the *art object*, and the subjective *becoming* authentic, we find the aesthetic redemption of the postmodern subject.

Part Five: Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to show that the former dialectic relationship of subject/object that informed the positive Absolute Idealism of Hegel and the positive material dialectic of Marx have been insufficient to adequately derive truth and freedom from the object in postmodern times. Part and parcel to this situation has been the *entanglement* implicit in the *falling prey*-ness of the objectified and commodified subject within the commodity structure. Further, we have tried to show that it is Adorno's negative dialectic that offers the subject a tool for the decipherment of its own facticity of being-in-the-world. This world, for those in the late capital countries of the West, has produced universal commodification by putting artificial valuation and even devalued both the object and then the subject resulting in nihilism. This phase of nihilism represents the horizon of postmodernity that is experienced in everyday life with the potential for creating value through either the givenness of the commodity structure to construct ourselves with *inauthentic* constellations of meaning, or through *art objects*, and the self-overcoming implied through Nietzsche's *Übermensch* that together, represent the potential for the postmodern subject to access truth, freedom and authenticity; perhaps representing the last positive freedom available to the subject.

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