

The Paradigm of Negation: The Aesthetics of Art and the Pharmakon of Deconstruction

برادايغم السلب: استطيعا الفن وفارماكون التفكيك

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Abstract:

This article seeks to investigate and explore the catastrophic dimensions of contemporary cultural transformations, which have led to a fundamental shift in the structure of Reason. Once "Enlightenment Reason" represented a horizon for liberation and emancipation, it has—under Western modern systems—succumbed to a consumerist "Instrumental Reason" governed by the logic of profitability and control. The study tracks how this shift evacuated the "Totalizing Being" of its spiritual and vital duration, transforming it into a mere "Civilizational Ossification" mired in materialism and dogma, where both humanity and existence are molded into rigid, stereotypical forms.

In confronting this cultural calcification, the study invokes the concept of the Pharmakon as a dual paradigm for understanding and deconstruction. It functions as an "antidote" seeking to dismantle the fetishistic radicalism (commodity fetishism) that dominates collective consciousness, while simultaneously acting as a "poison" that undermines the narcissistic illusions of Western Centralism. The article concludes that reclaiming subjective agency requires activating

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"Negative Dialectics," which exposes the falsehood of the culture industry and reformulates the relationship between consciousness and existence, far from the hegemony of instrumental rationality.

Keywords: Reason, Enlightenment Pharmakon, Dialectic

الملخص

يسعى هذا المقال إلى تقصي واستكشاف الأبعاد الكارثية للتحويلات الثقافية المعاصرة، التي أدت إلى انزياح جوهري في بنية العقل؛ فبعد أن كان "العقل التنويري" يمثل أفقاً للتحرر والانعتاق، استحال في ظل النظم الحداثية الغربية إلى "عقل أداتي" استهلاكي محكوم بمنطق الربحية والسيطرة. ترصد الدراسة كيف أدى هذا التحول إلى إفراغ "الكيونة الكليانية" من ديمومتها الروحية والحيوية، لتتحول إلى مجرد "تيبسية حضارية" غارقة في المادية والدوغمائية، حيث يتم قولبة الإنسان والوجود ضمن قوالب نمطية جامدة.

وفي مواجهة هذا التكلس الحضاري، تستحضر الدراسة مفهوم "الفارماكون" بوصفه برادايغماً مزدوجاً للفهم والهدم؛ فهو يعمل كـ "ترياق" يسعى لتفكيك الراديكالية الفيتشية (التقديس السلعي) التي تهيمن على الوعي الجمعي، وفي الوقت نفسه يشتغل كـ "سم" يقوض الأوهام النرجسية للمركزية الغربية. يخلص المقال إلى أن استعادة فاعلية الذات تقتضي تفعيل "الديالكتيك السلبي" الذي يفضح زيف الصناعة الثقافية، ويعيد صياغة العلاقة بين الوعي والوجود بعيداً عن هيمنة العقل الأداتي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عقل، تنوير، فارماكون، جدل

Introduction

The catastrophic conception of dominant totality was symbolically manifested in the Platonic dialectic, which Plato established within an imaginative act. Through this dialectic, existence is understood via the question and its opposite. Accordingly, language is positioned as an antithesis—a Pharmakon—to every fragmentation occurring within the Athenian subject. The Pharmakon operates through seduction; it pushes beyond general, natural, or familiar paths

and laws. Here, it uproots Socrates from his specific place and accustomed routes. While the latter always confined him within the city, the written pages act as a Pharmakon that drives or lures outside the city one who would never have left it, even at the last moment to escape the hemlock poison (Derrida, 1998, p. 22).

Writing alone practices destruction through the dialectic it establishes with existence. By virtue of the phenomenology of immersion within and consciousness of existence, the Pharmakon is formed as both a semblance and an antithesis simultaneously. Thus, Enlightenment culture stands as an antithesis to fetishistic, glorifying culture, allowing the Platonic question to appear as an anatomy of every dogmatic or axiomatic idea that causes the general cultural perspective to fall under an affirmative monism.

The Pharmakon intended here as a perspective for this study borrows from Plato's Pharmakon its inherent capacity for annulment and negation against the dominant Western totalizing culture. In other words, it aims at demolishing Western logocentrism and deconstructing its transcendental narcissistic illusions, through the critiques directed at it by the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory.

The Narcissism of Western Culture: From the Transcendent Eidos to the Dominant Paradigm

With the onset of the Enlightenment, Western Centralism attempted to establish its epistemological paradigm on the act of transcendence, and even skepticism, against every sacrosanct or venerated form. Through the "Copernican Revolution" of science, many Western metaphysical axioms were critiqued; the Cartesian Cogito functioned to negate any conception outside the system of Reason. Despite the apparent positivity of this rationalist approach, its overall trajectory was later diverted, and rationality was reduced to a mere tool, devoid of the capacity for pioneering action or enlightenment.

While Western rationality claimed to demolish idols by "philosophizing with a hammer"—to use Nietzsche's expression—we find it establishing its own paganism and idolatry upon an idealism that viewed "Genius" as the pivot of its worldview. In this context, Platonic propositions (mimesis) no longer possessed their existential legitimacy;

for Genius, in its transcendence and uncommitted ambiguity, became the foundation of the new heralded culture (Nietzsche, Baudelaire).

Despite the series of Kantian critiques regarding the transformations of Western Reason—through which Kant sought to replace empirical reason with transcendental reason, particularly in his precise differentiation between the faculties of the mind (separating the faculty of Art from empirical knowledge and practical desire in hopes of liberating Art from rational hegemony)—Kant, in his transcendental critiques, fell into the same predicament, albeit in a reversed manner.

This is because the "Aesthetic" for Kant is the "Sublime" emanating from Genius itself. Severing Art from its purposiveness and attaching it to "aesthetic taste" carries the core of Western transcendence—the Ego—as the sole entity capable of creating the Genius. Consequently, this vision was imposed on the judgment of Art and Culture. For him, culture must abandon any value—the industry of alienation—regardless of its nature; it aims at no end other than ambiguity and wonder, leading to the attainment of pleasure and gratification.

Kant's idealism, in its understanding of culture, delved into a subjective idealism that never heeded the ongoing dialectic within society. Following the same pattern as Plato's proposition of the radical, transcendent Eidos/Essence, Kant established an internal, transcendental Eidos that rendered the transcendence of "Western Common Taste" the judgment from which all other judgments proceed.

Accordingly, the culture of the collective was formed according to a material, empirical utilitarianism, and simultaneously as a culture seeking pleasure and gratification. This led to what would later become a "forbidden convergence" between empirical reason and hedonistic transcendence. These Western visions were then generalized and transformed into a totalitarian paradigm that the "Other/the vanquished" must follow.

It was this cultural transcendence that later created the monstrous expansion of Western Reason, which lost its compass and deviated from its enlightenment path when it turned industrial superiority into a means of oppression and control over both the Self and Alterity. Perhaps this individualistic, egoistic tendency of the European mind is what created "Commodity Fetishism" and its subsequent sanctification. It is the same

tendency that left the Western individual ontologically shattered in his Being—Dasein—living his existence within and toward Nothingness.

The Frankfurt School and the Critique of Western Centralism

The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory—or the Institute for Social Research—was established in the city of Frankfurt in 1922. "The primary figures behind the planning of what was considered a unique institute of its kind were Felix Weil, Friedrich Pollock, and Max Horkheimer, the latter of whom eventually became the Institute's director.(Slater, 2004).

Among its most prominent pioneers, alongside Horkheimer, were Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, and Jürgen Habermas. These scholars sought to dissect Western centralism and its categories of modernization, drawing from several foundational pillars. Most notable among these were Marxist influences, particularly regarding the concept of alienation within industrial society. The school also relied heavily on the sociological-philosophical writings of Max Weber, as well as Freudian psychoanalysis—which was developed within sociological perspectives, specifically by Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse. Additionally, they incorporated Hegelian-Marxist conceptions through the work of György Lukács, in which he expounded upon the idea of reification (Makkawi, 2017, p. 17).

Through its intellectual efforts, the Frankfurt School attempted to critique and deconstruct Western centralism, particularly concerning the claims of Enlightenment and modernization. This project addressed a "Reason" whose "Copernican" enlightenment trajectory had been diverted by Western systems, transforming it into a mere tool serving an instrumental society. This society prioritizes utilitarian profitability without regard for human essence or the spontaneous spirit, causing science to lose its most vital core: the capacity to achieve genuine benefit and facilitate human life by transitioning humanity from primitivity to true civilization. Consequently, a philosophy was needed to restore Reason to its former enlightenment status through processes of negation and refusal directed at every new glorification or technical mythology.

Accordingly, Western culture was viewed as carrying a catastrophic transcendental conception that stripped the individual of

their spirit, working instead toward their negation and enslavement. The individual was treated as an object to be programmed and controlled in a manner that serves the goals of a political class governed by instrumental capital. This is precisely what the Frankfurt School labored to critique and dismantle: "The philosophical project of the Frankfurt School is based on Reason, but not Reason in its 'positive' sense—the Reason of the Enlightenment, instrumental, and strategic thinking that has become a terrifying monster casting a dark fate over modern societies. Rather, the Reason from which the School proceeds is Negative Reason, which does not believe in ready-made ideas(Hamoun, 2021, p. 279).

Categories of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory

The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory was founded upon a critique of Western rationality—the "Dialectic of Enlightenment"—whose liberatory direction was diverted until it became a mere instrumental rationality, devoid of the capacity for destruction or transformation. Consequently, it became necessary to critique the system of totalitarian thinking and expose its dangers, along with the ideas it constructs that claim rationality and logic but, in reality, forge a new glorifying myth through the control and hegemony they exercise over the collective.

Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer regard Art as the most conscious of cultural forms and the most capable of reformulating a "New Reason" based on negation and refusal against every totalitarian, consumerist idea. Through Art, the falsehood of industrial civilization—which worked toward the complete ossification of culture—is exposed and unmasked: "The more the promises of the culture industry decline, the more its clarification of life, in its integrated sense, diminishes, and the more the ideology it promotes becomes meaningless. Even the abstract ideals of a healthy and harmonious society have, in the era of global advertising, become concrete examples. For we have learned to perceive the abstract side in advertising... and the word that is not a means appears absurd. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2006, p. 172).

The Art advocated by Adorno is not the deceptive art that intentionally misleads consumers for financial gain. Such art is a radicalized form that Western rationality has turned into its own praxis: "The semi-intellectual consciousness stops at 'this pleases me' and does not move a single inch beyond it. It laughs arrogantly out of sheer

confusion because poor cultural goods are manufactured to deceive the consumer. Here, art is supposed to be a comfortable, uncommitted entertainment... along with this false consciousness, which is simultaneously hostile to art, the element of imagination belonging to art and its apparent character unfolds within society: 'The world wants to be deceived.(Adorno, 2017, p. 364).

Art alone is capable of standing against the formations of false consciousness that Western Centralism has established as the model to be followed. Therefore, the "danger" of art, according to Adorno, stems from its ability to establish its negative opposition to the fraudulent system. This is manifested through the capacity of sophisticated (autonomous) art to expose and strip bare this deceptive, totalitarian control.

Thus, for Adorno, Art "respects the masses by confronting them with what they could be, rather than adapting to their degraded form. From a sociological perspective, the 'vulgar' in art is self-recognition coupled with humiliation that is objectively reproduced... That low art—entertainment—proceeds as a self-evident matter and possesses social legitimacy is a matter of ideology; that self-evident character is nothing more than an expression of the omnipresence of repression.(Adorno, 2017, p. 370).

Adorno and Horkheimer emphasize the peril of this ideologized culture, which has forced contemporary man into a rigid conformity, rendering "commodity fetishism" the primary metric for judging individuals. People are characterized—and indeed respected—only insofar as they possess commodities. Thus, the commodity becomes the ultimate human pursuit, attained even at the expense of one's humanity and soul, clearly manifesting human servitude and alienation within industrial societies: "Civilization has always contributed to the domesticating of revolutionary as well as barbaric instincts. But manufactured civilization has gone further. It highlights the only conditions under which we are permitted to live a ruthless life... Everyone has become an employee in a civilization of employees, where the dignity of the father is reduced to nothingness (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2006, pp. 178 – 179).

For Adorno, authentic art does not base its subject matter on entertainment or the provocation of pleasure for financial gain. Rather, authentic art is grounded in the "Negative Dialectics" of every instrumental hegemony. Through this negative dialectic, it liberates

man from the standardized rationality that led to his alienation: "Henceforth, the artist will be a genius only insofar as he is the bearer of a collective subject; he is the voice and memory of society simultaneously. Art will not be a consolation for anyone; it is more dangerous than that.(Bencheikh al – Maskini, 2011, p. 153).

Revolutionary art, in Adorno's view, is alone capable of achieving negation and refusal against any ossification or transcendent Dionysian or Apollonian category. This is because the "Genius," within his centralized conceptions, is no longer able—due to the loss of universal meaning—to immerse himself in the dialectic of the world or to strip away the calcified bourgeois sediments within the discourse of Western Reason. These sediments, through organized standardization, have become an obstacle to the revolutionary act that opposes this totalitarian dictatorship.

Regarding Marcuse, the industrial society—through its coordination, which is resistant to critique or demolition—has managed to dominate culture without leaving the latter any option for refusal. Unconsciously, Enlightenment culture has surrendered to this demeaning system: "Through technology, culture, politics, and the economy merge into an omnipresent system that devours or rejects all alternative choices and solutions. This system possesses a growing productivity and energy that lead society toward stability and confine technical progress within the blueprint of domination. (Marcuse, 1988, p. 33).

Industrial society, according to Marcuse, kills man's capacity to achieve freedom and revolutionary change. The consumerist pattern of these industrial societies has rendered the ideas of the masses stereotypical, directed solely toward fulfilling various material needs without actual regard for the fundamental and true needs of the human being: "Free enterprise was not originally an altogether qualified success. If freedom at that time was not just a matter of working or starving, it meant, for the vast majority of the population, toil, insecurity, and anxiety... Contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian by the very way it organizes its technological base. (Marcuse, 1988, pp. 38 – 39).

Erich Fromm posits that Western industrial civilization is a bureaucratic culture that standardizes the thought patterns of the collective, reducing individuals to mere "thing-like" entities possessing no will other than unconscious acquiescence: "In the great centers of

production, the great cities, and the great countries, people are managed as if they were things; they obey the laws of things. Yet, man was never intended to be a thing, and he is utterly destroyed if he becomes one. Before that occurs, he becomes despairing and desires to kill all life. (Fromm, 2011, p. 71).

Georg Lukács speaks with lamentation regarding this programmed destruction, which led to total reification (*Verdinglichung*) in both form and essence. In this state, distinctions between the labor system, the commodity, and the worker vanish, as all are subjected to a single, rigorous rational system: "All this demonstrates that the division of labor has been embedded in morality just as it has been embedded, along with crystallization, in psychology. This is not, however, a weakness; on the contrary, it is a strengthening of the structure of reified consciousness as a fundamental category for the whole of society. For as long as the fate of the worker appears as an isolated fate (Lukács, 1982, p. 92).

Lukács thus poses a fundamental question regarding the Western industrial society's claims of achieving equality among its members. This is a deceptive equality that exists only within a totalitarian theoretical space. The monstrous expansion of industrial society has reconstituted human servitude in its symbolic conception through two levels: the level of meaning, wherein man has lost his human spiritual values; and the level of characterization, wherein man is considered a "thing" within the totalitarian labor system.

Conclusion

Through this research, we have reached several results, which can be summarized as follows:

➤ The School, within its comprehensive paradigm, benefited from Hegelian dialectical propositions that establish a phenomenological dialectic with existence for the purpose of understanding and transcendence. In doing so, it drew upon the Kantian "aesthetics of the ugly" as an equivalent to the process of total negation and refusal against every fetishistic idolatry (Marx) that transformed the commodity into a new glorifying myth.

➤ The Frankfurt School proceeded in its various critiques from a radical critique of Western modern Enlightenment Reason and its founding centralisms. It achieved this by re-examining and

understanding the a priori conditions that led to the brutal industrial expansion—a monstrous growth that stifled the human spirit and the individual's capacity to exercise consciousness against any radical, generalizing discourse.

➤ For Adorno and Horkheimer, Art alone, through its enlightening and revolutionary power, is capable of exposing every cultural ossification and industrial expansion that seeks to entrench hegemony and control over the collective.

➤ Instrumental Reason, according to Marcuse and Erich Fromm, kills the human capacity for liberation and critique. By establishing a monistic rationality from which one must not deviate, industrial society founds its own brutal dictatorship.

➤ According to Lukács, industrial society led to the phenomenon of reification, which stripped man of his spirit and his ability to achieve consciousness, first of himself and second of existence.

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