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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

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“Aber die vollends aufgeklärte Erde strahlt im Zeichen triumphalen Unheils” (But the completely enlightened earth radiates under the sign of triumphant disaster). This sweeping statement about the pitfalls of an unchecked belief that an objective rationalism can provide the solution to all social ills and problems opens *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno during their wartime exile in Los Angeles. The manuscript was completed in 1944 and first published, to very little notice, in Amsterdam in 1947. The authors were hardly surprised that their form of social critique was met with such minimal interest at a time when most people were frantically attempting to look forward (“Don’t mention the war!”). Adorno repeatedly compared the book to a “message in a bottle” addressed to some imagined

(future) witness and written merely “so that it does not perish with us.” This bottle was first properly uncorked during the student protests of the late 1960s, but once the younger generation realized that it was not particularly useful as a revolutionary handbook, it soon lost interest in it.

In Max Horkheimer’s definition, “critical theory” seeks “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them.” Yet for the main protagonists of the so-called Frankfurt School the path to this liberation was the work in the archives and the interpretation of works of art and literature, not the erection of barricades. Critical theory remained popular, especially in German academic seminars throughout the seventies, but students were generally less concerned with the relevance of the theorists’ analytical statements than with the eloquence and poise of their language, especially that of Adorno. In the culturally boring and socially comparatively stable years that followed 1968, the abyss that had opened up in the middle of the twentieth century—the monstrous regimes of Stalin and Hitler—seemed safely relegated to the poison cabinet of history. And while proxy wars were fought with huge human losses all over the globe, they, too, were safely held at bay, far from the homes of Western societies and those very seminar rooms. It is deeply disconcerting to realize that the observations of the critical theorists have suddenly gained a new timeliness. Adorno’s 1967 lecture on “Aspects of a New Rightwing Radicalism” has recently become a bestseller among Germans witnessing the rising popularity of the profoundly reactionary and xenophobic *Alternative für Deutschland (AFD)* party. In the United States, where an incompetent government is barely able to contain a pandemic and has unquestionably failed to address a deep-seated systemic racism whose brutal manifestations might not be on the rise but can now be caught on camera and widely circulated on the web, these observations seem no less relevant. There might, therefore, be a lot of truth in Horkheimer and Adorno’s suggestion that “the completely enlightened earth radiates under the sign of triumphant disaster.”



Goya’s famous aquatint etching from his 1799 series *Caprichos* is one of those *Jahrhundertbilder* (images of the century) that effectively condenses the essence of an entire epoch and beyond: *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*. In Spanish, *sueño* can mean both “sleep” and “dream.” Translating this word as “sleep” in the context of Goya’s print would be the more straightforward interpretation. Reason is asleep and its temporary absence allows the monsters of irrationality to escape and take over. If we read *sueño* as “dream,” however, we are much closer to the essence of Horkheimer and Adorno’s study. The misguided trust in objective reason led, for example, to the *Terreur* into which the French Revolution of 1789 quickly descended in the years 1792–94 (plate 43 was created in 1797). And we know too well what horrors monolithic political theories—whether Soviet Marxism or National Socialism—engendered in the twentieth century.

The latest incarnation of the Enlightenment’s *ut*-belief in an objective rationalism that is supposedly resistant to ideology has surely been Silicon Valley’s technological determinism and its illusion that technological competence is automatically allied with moral decency. Google’s famous “Don’t Be Evil” as an official if not actual corporate code of conduct is a good example of this. Unsurprisingly, this has long since been debunked as the cynical coopting of morality for commercial gain; further, we have learned the hard way that the dark side has an equal facility with the new technological toys, be it Russian hackers or the Breitbart news network.

Around the year 70 CE, the Roman emperor, Vespasian, imposed a *vectigal urinae* (urine tax) on the distribution of urine from Rome’s Cloaca Maxima; the effluent was a valuable commodity used in tanning (as well as a precursor of today’s stain remover for laundry). As the Roman historian Sueton reports, when Vespasian’s son Titus complained to his father about what he thought was the revolting source of the tax, his father held a handful of gold coins under his nose and pointed out that whatever its origin, *pecunia non olet* (money does not stink). That this adage still effectively rules in our world of free-wheeling capitalism was witnessed recently during Mark Zuckerberg’s cringe-inducing interview in May 28 on Trump’s favorite news channel, Fox, when he justified Facebook’s so-called tolerance of the president’s dangerously ill-informed and inflammatory postings by calling Facebook’s position “stronger on free expression.” When the Fox reporter pressed him for a response to the president’s threat of censoring or even shutting down social platforms that introduced warnings or otherwise interfere with his tweets, Zuckerberg responded: “I’ll have to understand what they actually would intend to do, but in general I think a government choosing to censor a platform because they’re worried about censorship doesn’t exactly strike me as the right reflex there.” Boy, you can just sense a whole battalion of lawyers at work in Facebook’s legal department struggling to get that one right.

A few days later, Facebook hosted an internal video conference Q&A, and it quickly became clear how disillusioned even the company’s employees have become by now. The mood as well as the issue that is at stake were brilliantly summed up by one employee who exposed the posturing of his boss as the sycophantic toadying it effectively is when he/she asked: “Why are the smartest people in the world focused on contorting or sort of twisting our policies to avoid antagonizing Trump instead of driving social issue progress?”

But there is some hope out there, too. The groundswell protest movement flaring up all over the United States and the generation of a young generation that is technologically adept and well-equipped to organize spontaneous protest. They are further empowered by a moral imperative to take action and to urgently address the evils of long-embedded racism. Zuckerberg’s stance of “not being arbiters of truth” might simply no longer be good enough. As I watched all this unfold, I was reminded of what Albert Camus once famously remarked in the late 1940s when Sartre, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty were probably having one of their high-minded intellectual discussions about *Being and Nothingness* or *Sense and Non-Sense*: “But what if we’re all simply wrong? What if Nietzsche and Hegel misled us, and there really are moral values? What if we ought all along to have been talking about them?” So, what if yes, there actually are moral values that need to be held up, even if we risk, by doing so, to appear philosophically innocent or even naive?

Which brings me to the question raised in the subject line of this *Abwechslung/Distraction*. I came to Instagram for the simple reason that I like to take photos and love to share images of art. At one point a dear friend to whom I had been sending images pointed out that I should start putting them on Instagram instead. Then it became a two-fold gamble with my teenage son about how many followers I could find. That it took me three years to rustle up a mere 1500 made him win every wager we ever had along the way, but the gain for me was that he stayed away from it since pretty much everything his old dad does is so inherently uncool that it’s not even worth thinking about. For someone like me, who has never had a Facebook account, it was a constant source of chagrin to see that company’s logo pop up for a brief moment every time Instagram was loading on my phone. But then, it was/still is fun to play around with. I sometimes make connections with people I would otherwise never have met and learn about things that I would otherwise be completely unaware of. I have also heard from young artists in particular that for them Instagram is often the only way to make their art known to a wider public; and yes, the current wave of social protests is also a reminder of the organizing power such social platforms have been providing at least since the Arab Spring in the early 2010s.

The (hypothetical) counter argument would be that if Breitbart or Fox had a good art critic on staff, would this be reason enough to watch it? Whatever my decision, it is reassuring to know that it will not make the slightest bit of difference anyway.



And what about all the other services such as WhatsApp that are now owned by Facebook? Being truly consequential, one would constantly need to scout out new alternatives only to wake up one morning to learn that those, too, are now no longer independent and have been acquired by either Facebook, Google, Apple, or Amazon. It would be an endless game of catching up or, rather, of being caught up. Taking all of this into account, one feels a bit like the artist in Füßli’s famous drawing who despairs before the grandeur of ancient ruins.

Only that our despair today is over the pervasiveness that all of these services have already gained in our everyday lives.

I am, therefore, curious to hear, dear readers, what advice you have for me. Is it time to quit Instagram?

Goya



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