Knock Knock
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> The individual owes his crystallization to the forms of political economy, particularly to those of the urban market. Even as the opponent of the pressure of societization [*Vergesellschaftung*] he remains the latter's ownmost product and its likeness. What enables him to resist, that streak of independence in him, springs from monadological individual interest and its precipitate, character. The individual mirrors in his individuation the preordained societal law of exploitation, however much mediated. This means too, however, that his decay in the present phase must itself not be deduced individualistically, but from the societal tendency which prevails by means of individuation and not merely as its enemy. (§ 97[1])

Adorno's "urban market" has become today's digital domain, and its forms of political economy and ubiquitously reticulated "veil of technology" mark a new phase in the decay of the individual. "Bourgeois walking" (§ 102) has been eclipsed by the coarse gestures of scrolling, swiping, and hitting, requiring only the four compass points of left/right, up/down and target buttons: with these gestures 'users' consume content (a mass noun) and choose people and wares alike in a similar mode of solipsistic distraction that blithely and mercilessly caricatures Walter Benjamin's now seemingly wistful collectivist vision. One is dispersed phenomenologically before one is reconstituted virtually. Each person is delivered products – screeds and stories, toothpaste and pharma adverts, candidate pets and sexual partners – "chosen just for you" with more speed and less answerability each day. Pseudo-individuation – "have it your way" – has advanced to the point where the almost innumerable harvested data points for each singleton "end-user" ensure the delivery of a mixed concoction of mass-produced mediocrity with planned obsolescence that is perfectly suited to his "profile," a term that tellingly reduces the human being to a silhouette. The fineness of the grid's mesh by which our authenticity is packaged and sold to us preempts genuine experience and growth more than any self-help book ever could: "werde, was du klickst" and "to thine own bot be true."

But a qualitative reversal has taken place. The exchange principle remains in force, of course, but now reaches further into the subject, transforming him into a social object, for the user-profile is the actual commodity that is traded in the "digital handshake." The individual is dissolved – "rendered" – into a set of data points, input for Markov-chain algorithms, "black box" routines that yield behavioral expectations for each data set. Individual autonomy and interiority, the process of weighing goals and conflicting values that animates the Kantian picture of the will, seems now as quaint and kitschy as a creaking Black Forest cuckoo clock. Individual subjectivity is epiphenomenal; idiosyncratic deviation, ambivalence and inner struggle, conscience, are statistically insignificant; the algorithmically aggregated is nowadays the rational, and only it is the real. The bearer of an 'ethics of conviction' is a mere screen-memory of an earlier phase of capitalism, the afterglow of a device permanently powering down. "Through this dissolution of all the mediating elements within the individual himself,

by virtue of which he was, in spite of everything, also a part of the societal subject, he regresses, impoverished and coarsened, to the state of a mere societal object" (§ 97).

A primal phenomenon of "the social *principium individuationis*" is the further dissolution of an integrated self as theorized by Freud. Alongside making each individual the executor of repression of his impulses, including those impulses required for any genuine happiness, neo-liberalist ideology elevated each individual's rational ego into the manager of his own assets: natural talents, and the acquired skills and credentials that insidiously constrict and subordinate his realm of possible experience to the logic of return on investment. At the same time, this ideology insinuated that each individual was wholly responsible for his economic fate, rather than the systemic "laws of motion" that constitute an increasingly overwhelming second nature confronting him. The cruelty and aggression that one inflicted upon oneself for being a "loser'" could easily be redirected, by charismatic self-promoting "winners," onto any out-group: immigrants, elites, political opponents. Part of the psychic regression is precisely this reduction of others into friend or foe (§ 85). Anonymity online, the use of pseudonyms or avatars, ratifies the disintegration of the self; the autonomization [*Verselbständigung*] of semblance in online "screen identities" both masks and reveals the autonomization of unchecked, unrepressed impulses IRL: countless Underground Men impotently seething within the Crystal Palace.

In this development the capacity of people to speak with each other is further degraded, not only by the atrophying of "experience worth communicating" but also because the means of expression are being replaced "by a societally prepared mechanism" (§ 90). Adorno, who castigated the use of slogans, catchphrases, and so on as symptoms of reified thought, also foresaw the further development into what bears the deceptively harmless, infantilized name of "emoji." "The omnipresent images are none, because they present the wholly general, the average, the standard model, as something unique or special, and so at the same time deride it. The abolition of the particular is turned insidiously into something particular. The desire for particularity has already sedimented in need, and is reproduced on all sides by mass culture, on the pattern of the comic strip [*Funnies*]" (§ 92). Emojis are the death masks of the comic strip, frozen rigor mortis in the service of utmost efficiency in the simplest communication, the quickest means to signal good and bad, friend and foe.

And yet as all language has a double character, so too this picture language contains within it what might transcend it (§ 97). Underneath the anodyne image personifying the rationalized signal as stripped of noise as possible, the labored smile of the salesman heeding the command to "always be selling," the cartoon-like images at the same time suggest the reassuring *imago* of the child's world as a room full of toys; they at once evoke and mockingly betray the delicate intimation of what it would feel like to be genuinely at home, bei sich im anderen, in a sheltered space where a self still *in statu nascendi* can wondrously lose and find itself within an artful second nature populated by playful possibilities.

Notes

1   All quotations, often modified by me, are from T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, translated by E.F.N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 1974.

Biography

Henry W. Pickford is Professor of German and Philosophy at Duke University. He is the author of *The Sense of Semblance: Philosophical Analyses of Holocaust Art* (Fordham University Press); *Thinking with Tolstoy and Wittgenstein: Expression, Emotion, and Art* (Northwestern University Press; forthcoming in Russian translation with Academic Studies Press); co-author of *In Defense of Intuitions: A New Rationalist Manifesto* (Palgrave Macmillan); co-editor of *Der aufrechte Gang im windschiefen Kapitalismus: Modelle kritischen Denkens* (Springer Verlag); editor and translator of Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (Columbia University Press) and *Selected Early Poems* of Lev Loseff (Spuytenduyvil Press); and author of over twenty-five articles and book chapters. He is currently co-authoring the book *Adorno: A Critical Life* and co-editing the *Oxford Handbook to Adorno*. More information about his work can be found on academia.edu.