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The Folly of Reason and Gravity of Reconciled Humour in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Author

SHERYL TUTTLE ROSS
AARON GOLEC

Affiliation

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
LA CROSSE

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to show how, taken at face value, it appears that Horkheimer and Adorno's conception of the culture industry presented in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not allow for integral freedom—or the very freedom which is at the heart of modernity's conception of the person and is the basis for its political philosophy. Nevertheless, the text has the resources to support a slightly less pessimistic reading, and provide a role for irony. That is, once the distinction between terrible laughter and reconciled laughter as well as terrible and reconciled humour is understood, the text rewards rational reconstruction to demonstrate the folly of reason, and in doing so, we might experience *Dialectic of Enlightenment* itself as an instance of reconciled humour. Perhaps, the text itself offers a way to mitigate against Horkheimer and Adorno's condemnation of the culture industry so that it is less totalizing than it would first appear. Thus, we interpret *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as an exercise in reconciled humour, and not the terrible humour so frequently found in the culture industry.

I. CULTURE INDUSTRY AS IRON SYSTEM

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* seems to be an inherently pessimistic text. Western civilization is depicted as an iron

system where oppression and false consciousness are ubiquitous. This system, they argue, arises out of the main theoretical foundations of the so-called modern liberal democratic state, namely the presupposition that human beings are creatures endowed with reason, and this capacity to reason is essential to their own governance. The central claim is that Western society has developed with an over-dependence on *logos* or instrumental reason at the expense of a more expanded notion of reason which includes a technical notion of *mimesis*. A direct result of modernity's blind faith in reason is in their words "disaster triumphant".¹ Given that this text is a response to truly troubling events—the Nazi concentration camps and Stalinist terror, there would seem to be no role for laughter in such an iron system. If justice demands that citizens are granted equal rights based on the conception of the person as endowed with reason, then how is it possible that citizens are exterminated and cities are annihilated? Horkheimer and Adorno do not claim that there is some sort of break between theory and practice, so that it was simply the case that Hitler and Stalin did not follow the rules, but rather that there was something within the Enlightenment project itself, broadly conceived as originating with Homer that can account for this "barbarism".² They claim that the full-force dedication to the ideals of reason which permeates every aspect of contemporary life creates the grounds for totalitarian regimes or at the very least for a culture that is rationally assimilated and authoritarian.

The aim of this paper is to show how, taken at face value, it appears that Horkheimer and Adorno's conception of the culture industry does not allow for integral freedom—or the very freedom which is at the heart of modernity's conception of the person and is the basis for its political philosophy. Nevertheless, the text has the resources to support a slightly less pessimistic reading, and provide a role for irony which came to be among prevalent artistic practices for postmodern aesthetics. That is, once the distinction between terrible laughter and reconciled laughter as well as terrible and reconciled humour is understood, the text rewards rational reconstruction to demonstrate the folly of reason, and in doing so, we might experience *Dialectic of Enlightenment* itself as an instance of reconciled humour. Perhaps, the text itself offers a way to mitigate against Horkheimer and Adorno's condemnation of the culture industry so that it is less totalizing than it would first appear. Therefore, laughter has a critical role in a slightly less pessimistic reading of the text as once the distinction between reconciled and terrible laughter is integrated into the text itself, one may interpret *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as an exercise in reconciled humour, and not the terrible humour so frequently found in the culture industry. The freedom involved in this beneficial sort of humour—reconciled humour—may be fleeting, but it is nevertheless significant.

II. WHAT'S WRONG WITH REASON?

Horkheimer and Adorno's Diagnosis of the Ills of Instrumental Rationality

—"The sleep of reason produces nightmares" Francisco de Goya

It is worth noting at the outset that Horkheimer and Adorno conceived of themselves over and against analytic philosophy, and as such they pride themselves on writing philosophical fragments.³ For them, rational connections between claims in an argument on the one hand embody domination in the conceptual realm as this is how science dominates nature. On the other hand, in contrast, fragments embody modernist art which they hold in high regard. The rhetorical importance of such fragments, given their critique of positivistic reasoning, is that they are not performative contradictions as Habermas might have us believe.⁴ That is, if they were to rail against reason by offering reasons laid out in proof-like precision, then the critique of reason itself would be at least paradoxical.

Nevertheless, sorting through the labyrinth of their fragments, we can reconstruct their fragmented musings into formal arguments. Moreover, such a reconstruction may reveal the potential for a devastating critique of an overgrown logos by being a parody of it. According to our alternative reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a reading which aims at a slightly less pessimistic interpretation of the culture industry, the first step is to take logos or the rational aspects of their musings and reconstruct them as basic arguments with conclusions supported by reasons. In short, this will show us the reasons for reason's folly.

The fragment arguments within *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that demonstrate this folly provide a *reductio ad absurdum* to the Enlightenment idea that reason should always triumph over unreason, allowing us to reach the conclusion that myth and reason belong together in dialectic, with the aim that such an extended version of reason is able to integrate its opposite; a Hegelian (and Freudian) idea. That is, although these qualities are seemingly opposite and irreconcilable, they should in fact mediate each other. Moreover, if brought together, myth and reason would reconcile the real world and the intellectual world, manual and intellectual labour, high and low art, and thereby gives rise to integral freedom.

As is formally required by the *reductio ad absurdum* and to provide a rhetorical foil, we begin our creative reconstruction of their argument by assuming the opposite. The starting place must be an argument for reason as if reason were all that the Enlightenment had hoped it would be. We may reconstruct the argument as follows:

1. If the Enlightenment rejects mythology in favour of reason, then reason is necessary for the pursuit of knowledge and myth is contrary to the pursuit of knowledge.
2. The purpose of Enlightenment reason is to begin a new era of human

progress by means of divorcing the intellect from tradition and fantasy in order to make rational thinking irreconcilable with mythical thinking, more specifically mythic imagination.

3. Therefore, any society premised on the promise of human progress must reject myth and solely rely on reason and such an Enlightenment-informed society would be truly just.

Of course, Horkheimer and Adorno have an idiosyncratic definition of the Enlightenment which might be roughly thought to correspond with the Greek term “logos”. They attribute the primacy of reason and the inferiority of “*mythos*” to all rationalist philosophers from Plato onwards. It is this central tenet of the Enlightenment that Horkheimer and Adorno find absurd in many ways. The next step in a *reductio ad absurdum* proof is to demonstrate that the consequences of the previously argued conclusion (3) are absurd, contradictory, or at least wildly implausible. The next section will describe a number of absurdities Horkheimer and Adorno find with the assumption that reason is as powerful as the Enlightenment presupposes in premises (1) & (2) in the *reductio ad absurdum* argument.

III. THE ABSURDITY OF AN UNMITIGATED LOGOS

A central part of any *reductio ad absurdum* argument is the description of the absurdities inherent in the conditional foregrounding. In order to fully address what is wrong with reason in late-capitalistic society, Horkheimer and Adorno describe a number of the paradoxical consequences of taking reason to be the foundation of a modern civil society. This section is devoted to a close textual reading and to reconstructing these absurdities described throughout the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The presentation of these absurdities is not necessarily in the order of their occurrence within the text, and the arguments are simply numbered for clarity’s sake. The importance of reconstructing the philosophical claims as arguments is to demonstrate that logos does play a critical role in dialectical philosophy, and that it is paradoxically necessary and potentially self-destructive. In short, this close reading demonstrates Horkheimer and Adorno’s method of negative dialectics in which “any way of thinking can turn into its opposite in changed circumstances”.⁵ Moreover, the necessity of the conditional makes the five absurdities listed below unavoidable, given the power ceded to instrumental rationality.

First, (1) there is the absurdity inherent in the problem of identity which needs universals or generalizations for the production of knowledge. That is, if the domain of knowledge is limited to the products of reason, then reason paradoxically obstructs worldly knowledge or at the very least knowledge of the sensuous nature of particulars. A paradigm of logic, the Aristotelean Square of Opposition functions by subsuming particulars under universals. However, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that this prevents us from knowing the things-in-themselves or their sensuous nature because what is common to

all is what is emphasized. Accordingly, ineffable experiences are not candidates for knowledge. For example, reason cannot fully capture the particular sensation of drinking a cup of coffee or the exact fragrance of the spring-time air. Horkheimer and Adorno write, “[s]ociety is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities . . . anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion; modern positivism consigns it to poetry”.⁶ The sensuous particulars of the world and the language of metaphor which characterizes sensuous perceptions and human imagination are neutralized and classified according to rules and formulas. This perspective took its most severe form in positivism where that which could not be analyzed logically was not suitable for philosophical analysis, and thus only to be passed over in silence.

In response to what we call, the first absurdity, Habermas criticized what seems to be the dismissal of reason and logic, however, if we read the problem of identity as part of a *reductio ad absurdum*, then what is wrong isn’t reason and logic per se, but the way the positivist’s method held that it is the *sine qua non* of philosophy.⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno find this reification of logos problematic because such a method ignores the social and historical particularity which is where all truth resides. They claim that the positivists, only to their detriment, focus on universal truths or grist for the mill of instrumental reason. Simply creating a system to categorize experience does not yield real knowledge, only a way to manage information. This management of information, unjustified by reason, leads to what they will claim as another absurdity.

A second absurdity, (2), that results from prizing logos to the detriment of mythos is the putative nature of certainty which ends in the impotence of reason. Even though reason is the *sine qua non* of the Enlightenment, reason cannot justify itself. Horkheimer and Adorno write, “[t]hinking, as understood by the Enlightenment, is the process of establishing a unified scientific order and of deriving factual knowledge from principles, whether these principles are interpreted as arbitrarily posited axioms, innate ideas, or the highest abstractions. The laws of logic establish the most universal relationships within the order and define them. Unity lies in self-consistency.”⁸ However, just as there is no solution to Hume’s problem of induction, there is no point at which the whole enterprise itself is justified: “the notion of the self-understanding of science conflicts with the concept of science itself”.⁹

Furthermore, reason is not yet triumphant because it cannot account for unexpected failures: “not only does the expected event fail to occur, but the unexpected happens; the bridge collapses, the crop fails, the medicine causes illness.”¹⁰ With these observations, Adorno and Horkheimer seem to be asking the rhetorical question: if reason and thinking were to be all so empowering and capable of realizing Enlightenment ideals, then why are we constantly beleaguered with failure? It is the failure unpredicted that echoes the failure of reason, and as such it belies Enlightenment’s quest for certainty.

An apologist for this so-called Enlightenment thinking might note that it is through failure and the diagnosis of what went wrong that knowledge is actually furthered. In fact, as A.J Ayer and Karl Popper have argued, one of the criteria for a proposition's potential to be considered to be a candidate for knowledge is that it must be verifiable or falsifiable. However, we can clarify the more precise objection to logos as I have described it in this *reductio ad absurdum*. It is not the case that Horkheimer and Adorno are eschewing all uses of reason, but simply objecting to instrumental and logical reason's status as the only method of philosophy. That is, even if a proposition is verified, it is far from certain. Even though Descartes' aim was to provide one solid foundation for the truth of science, the father of modernity's goal in his grounding opus, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, was ultimately unsuccessful. The fatal flaws of solipsism and infinite regress deny the certainty that Horkheimer and Adorno deem to be a rather shaky foundation which leads to further absurdity.

A third absurdity (3) we find Horkheimer and Adorno addressing is the status of thinking itself. The Turing debate raised the question of whether or not machines could think. If so, then what was once regarded as the essential feature of a human being, *res cogitans*, becomes demystified. The metaphysical implication is that what is essential to the human isn't uniquely human and can be reduced to a process. The thinking process itself could be more efficiently handled by computing machines rendering the essential nature of a human being an insufficient ground for the privileged place modernity accords the person. Horkheimer and Adorno write, "[t]hought is reified as autonomous, automatic process, aping the machine it has itself produced, so that it can finally be replaced by the machine".¹¹ If thinking and rationality are what ground the claim to human rights, and machines can think, then either machines have rights or else the concept of human rights is dispelled as another quaint myth. "For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion?. Its own ideas of human rights then fare no better than the older universals. Any intellectual resistance it encounters merely increases its strength".¹² Rationality itself becomes superior even to persons, including those who once thought that the capacity to reason is humanity's greatest quality and the grounds for domination over nature.

A so-called apologist for Enlightenment thinking might retort that reducing thinking to a process does not devalue humanity as it is not thinking per se that is replaced by the machine, but rather the ability to follow a set of instructions. However, the point of the third absurdity still stands because what is presupposed by liberal democratic theory—the ability to follow laws as rational constructs—is the same for man and machine. The failure to abide by those laws is not met with praise, but with punishment and yet more absurdity.

The fourth absurdity (4) describes the cumulative effect of a situation where the political and economic system is held in higher esteem than any individual human being. For Horkheimer and Adorno rationality entails adherence to a totalizing and oppressive system. It is therefore absurd that rationality is prized at the expense of humanity. For example, “if, in the absence of the social subject, the volume of goods took the form of so-called overproduction in domestic economic crises in the preceding period, today, thanks to the enthronement of powerful groups as that social subject, it is producing the international threat of fascism: progress is reverting to regression”.¹³ The absurdity of the so-called “rational economic man” is that the economy does not function for every person who is rational, and as such creates the conditions for fascism to flourish. As Bowie notes, “the Holocaust employed the rationalized means of technologically developed societies to enable what would otherwise have been impossible. One aspect of this was precisely the fact that these rationalized means allowed many of those contributing to the horror to exclude the kind of thoughts and feelings which would have prevented them from contributing”.¹⁴ That is, the same method of domination that Horkheimer and Adorno find within the ethical realm paradoxically leads to human beings treated as objects instead of subjects. “Not only is domination paid for with the estrangement of human beings from the dominated objects, but the relationships of human beings, including the relationship of individuals to themselves, have themselves been bewitched by the objectification of mind”.¹⁵ Hence, the absurdity is that a system founded on the individual’s capacity to reason ends up using that reason to vitiate the value of the human being.

A fifth absurdity (5) is that the value of humanity as a whole is reduced to a utilitarian aggregate. Instrumental rationality prizes the economy of late capitalism over the intrinsic worth of the person. “Who dies is unimportant; what matters is the ratio of incidences of death to the liability of the company. It is the law of large numbers, not the particular case which reoccurs in the formula”.¹⁶ The economy presupposes fungible objects; that is, different items can be exchanged with a common measure. There is a price for everything, and if it is thought that human beings are priceless, in terms of the economic measure it is the same as their being worth nothing. Thus, late-consumer capitalism either has to deny that there can be a price for human beings and treat them as worthless or put a price on what ought not to have one. More generally, they claim that “[r]eason serves as a universal tool for the fabrication of all other tools, rigidly purpose-driven and as calamitous as the precisely calculated operations of material production, the results for human beings escape all calculations”.¹⁷ This results in dire consequences for human beings and for nature. Corporate practices based on instrumental reason do not have any regard for any intrinsic value in nature, but instead only regard it as raw material for industry to exploit. “The man of science knows things

to the extent that he can make them. Their ‘in-itself’ becomes ‘for him’ ”.¹⁸ This is ultimately self-destructive as “what human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings”.¹⁹ Thus, they will claim that this totalizing system functions to the detriment of nature, human beings, and culture itself.

At this point, it is easy to see how interpretations of Horkheimer and Adorno focus on the devastating, all-encompassing critique of modernity. However, we should note that this critique derives from a rationalist’s standpoint in order to show that instrumental reason devours its own children. The presupposition here is that mythos plays no role in a rationally structured society, and without mythos, the totalizing effects of logos produce and reproduce the last absurdity. This is not to say that they will accept a positive role to a garden-variety myth, but instead will develop a technical account of mythos as instrumental reason’s counterpart.

The final absurdity (6) of instrumental reason in Horkheimer and Adorno’s account is the culture industry, for this is what replicates the iron system of rationally-driven economics. In fact, it is the ultimate absurd consequence of the Enlightenment project, as it is the embodiment of subsumptive reason in which differences are ignored as the culture industry “infects everything with sameness”.²⁰ Under the banners of freedom and choice, individuals are reduced to marketable groups, thus amounting to a false individuality and an inorganic culture.

Furthermore, Horkheimer and Adorno claim the devastating efficiency of a rationally administered culture relies not only on “infecting everything with sameness” by means of corporate monopolies, the interconnection of different industries, and the quality of mass art, but also on repressing the imagination of those who consume culture. “It is not the material preconditions of fulfillment, unfettered technology as such, which make fulfillment uncertain. [...] The fault lies in a social context which induces blindness”.²¹ They see the culture industry as a totality; that is, “the whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry”.²² The entertainment offered to consumers as fulfillment and escape from the mechanized work process succeeds because it “leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience,” thus “stunting the mass media consumers’ powers of imagination and spontaneity” because “no scope is left for the imagination”.²³ The successful integration of society into a manipulated whole relies on the success of instrumental reason by means of repressing its opposite: mythic imagination.

Hence, the inability of individuals to creatively structure and interpret their lives is the direct result of a “circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the system grows ever stronger,” and thus often renders the political subjects of modern liberal democracies feeling powerless.²⁴ One who desires to succeed within the culture industry and attain what it promises must adapt to it, and thus must forfeit his or her claims to the imagination, that is, to imagine possibilities outside of what the culture industry promises

and offers. The subsequent inability to imagine anything other than the culture industry as a genuine possibility for life thus ensures further reliance on it, and the system grows ever more influential.

With increasing pessimism and perhaps even crankiness, Horkheimer and Adorno regard the culture of apathy and powerlessness concerning political life as “intimately bound up with boredom: boredom is objective desperation. It is also, however, symptomatic of the deformations perpetrated upon man by the social totality, the most important of which is surely the defamation and atrophy of the imagination”.²⁵ Bored individuals within the culture industry find themselves helpless in using their imagination to create and participate in activities that would make their free time worthwhile, thus they look to the entertainment offered by the culture industry as a means of escape from their boredom. As a result, entertainment is often viewed with undue seriousness, and news of actual importance, valuable to the rationally informed political subject necessary for the liberal democratic state, is often packaged as entertainment. “Amusement always means putting things out of mind, forgetting suffering, even when it is on display. At its root is powerlessness. It is indeed escape, but not, as it claims, escape from bad reality but from the last thought of resisting that reality”.²⁶ The absurdity of the culture industry renders making sound and well-informed political judgments irrelevant.

Thus, the absurdities of unmitigated logos, in short, a neglect of myth and dedication to the ideals of reason, are numerous. From the first absurdity in which the potential for sensuous knowledge is thwarted by Aristotelian logic to the ultimate absurdity of the culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno’s fragments themselves provide reasons for reason’s folly. Logos results in a rational loss of individuality and creates a rational domination of nature and individuals by reducing them to mere economic products. The reduction of cultural artifacts to mere economic products where efficiency is the measure of success as is the case in the culture industry shows the failure of modernity to embrace imagination. It is important to note here that these absurdities do not lead necessarily to the iron system, but rather they are inherent in the use of rationality over and above any other. If the conclusion of the *reductio ad absurdum* argument is that mythos and logos should temper each other, then it is mythos which holds the keys to the prison created by the culture industry’s rational disaster. Logos has been shown to be absurd on its own terms; this self-contradiction is the irrational foundation of modernity. However, there is a meta-question: What to make of the use of logos to demonstrate its shortcomings? If reason has the power to show its own deficits, then maybe it is indeed more powerful than mythos and the iron system is a description of an inescapable dystopic reality. There is another possible reading which requires viewing the argumentative form of the *reductio ad absurdum* as a rhetorical strategy. We should be careful to note that we are not claiming that this is what Horkheimer and Adorno intended through their text, but

instead that the text itself is open to the potential reading; a reading that may illuminate the prevalence of irony and satire in postmodern aesthetics.

IV. A RHETORICAL ROLE OF THE REDUCTION TO ABSURDITY

In the previous section, Horkheimer and Adorno's social critique was reconstructed as a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. The view that rationality left unchecked leads to totalitarian regimes and authoritarian cultures turns on a causal argument whose key player is instrumental reason. The idea that a society founded on the power of *logos* inevitably leads to an authoritarian iron system commits a number of fallacies—most obviously, the slippery slope fallacy. At the very least the argument turns on hyperbolic descriptions of the consequences of subsumptive reason. "Reason" itself seems to be used ambiguously, as it sometimes refers to mental processes and other times it refers to the operation of Aristotelean logic, although clearly there is some connection between the two spheres of reason. The scope and power of their critique of reason is a matter of interpretative dispute. If interpreted strongly as a critique of all reason, then their argument is simply self-defeating.²⁷

However, it may very well be that *Logos* pursued to its extreme is tragically funny. If we view their extravagant descriptions as a rhetorical flourish, then we can accept elements of their overall view of society, but stop short of endorsing the "totalizing disaster triumphant" description of the modern liberal democratic state.²⁸ This is a novel way of reading Horkheimer and Adorno as it limits the critique of reason to merely its overpopulation in an ecosystem that requires both myth and reason. It is an analysis that assumes that we could construct a meta-level irony to the text. The aim of this alternative reading is to use patient logical analysis to discover the limits of logic and to use the imagination to piece together Horkheimer and Adorno's disparate fragments into a fractured whole that is capable of sustaining a meta-analysis. This requires us to see *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a speech act and as a representation.

The alternative reading proposed here need not accept Horkheimer and Adorno's seeming claim that all uses of Aristotelean logic amount to domination and that because proof of certainty for most empirical claims is not forthcoming, reason itself is a failure. This alternative reading can accept the view that the central argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* starts with the concept of self-preservation that pushes thinking onto the track of identification and domination as we will see in the next section how a more robust notion of *mythos* can overcome these tendencies. Furthermore, we do not have to accept that all modern economic systems must reduce human beings to all and only cogs in a big machine. The leap from a certain form of reasoning to totalitarian societies is a diagnosis formed on the presumption that modernity was correct in assuming that *logos* is a self-sufficient ground-

ing of a just society. There in fact seems to be a paradoxical relationship between the individualism prized by most inhabitants of late capitalism and the prevalence of the policies to support the economic system at the cost of the individual. There is wide spread societal acceptance, say for example, that corporations should lay-off people if it maximizes their profit margins. The same tension pervades contemporary discussions of human rights. Horkheimer and Adorno's description of a society that purports that individual rights and freedoms are important, yet supports policies that undercut the value of those rights and freedoms seems quite accurate even today as the debates surrounding a global refugee crisis gives rise to policies in some countries that restrict freedom in the name of so-called "security."

Horkheimer and Adorno note the consequences for the imagination that "just as prohibition has always ensured the admission of the poisonous product, the blocking of the theoretical imagination has paved the way for political delusion, they are deprived by the mechanisms of censorship, both the external ones and those implanted with them, of the means of resisting it".²⁹ Freedom within late capitalist modernity is therefore little more than the freedom to consume, and the culture industry depends upon and reinforces this mind-set by promulgating the story that anyone can "make it" in society, through hard work and capitulation to the system. Consumption itself has even become a patriotic value with a slogan that anyone can become successful and prosperous. Horkheimer and Adorno's description of the culture industry is likewise hyperbolic. The vast majority of mass media news does seem insufficient in informing consumers with news in a historical, global, and multi-political context, that is, news appropriate to informing a rational citizen of a liberal democratic state. The remedy is not to rid oneself of logos as that would be as equally ridiculous as a society built upon mere logos.

There is an alternative. If, by and large, the culture industry is a product of the ubiquitous employment of instrumental reason, then the remedy involves a role for a more robust concept of reason that has a special role for myth and humour. Given that the first type of mass media is arguably the printing press, and that Horkheimer and Adorno were writing a book that would indeed be distributed by means of the mass production and distribution afforded by the publishing industry, it will seem that maybe the joke is on the reader. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* rewards reading and reconstructing rationally in order to conclude that rationality gives rise to oppression. In the next section, we will suggest that although society seems to regard instrumental reason as its foundation, and as a foundation it has been found wanting, a more robust sense of reason even within the iron system is perhaps made possible by humour, specifically reconciled humour.

V. HUMOUR, MYTH, IMAGINATION AND FREEDOM

The role of a more robust sense of reason in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is motivated by the shortcomings of a society dedicated to instrumental reason alone. To figure out what mythos or myth's role should be and how it could be a complementary force, we can follow the criticisms implied by the *reductio ad absurdum* argument. If reason means subsuming particulars to universals at the cost of the uniqueness and individuality of the particular experience, myth provides a corrective by deploying metaphors which purposively do not try for a veridical representation of reality. If subsumptive reason presumes to offer a mirror of the world, mythic imagination highlights not only the image but also the act of reflecting. If reason aims at certainty and scientific knowledge, myth strives for practical or ethical knowledge. The use of myth assuages the dehumanizing excesses of instrumental reason. The corrective qualities of mythos for culture—within the combination of myth and reason—can realize the promises of the Enlightenment.

In rather poetic language, using Odysseus as a paradigmatic case of mythology, Horkheimer and Adorno reveal how myth itself functions. In more general terms, mythic imagination functions by the recognition that it is pretend or more precisely, that it is both self-referential and non-veridical or in other words, it eschews the idea of a mere mirror of reality. Myth, therefore, is epistemically responsible for its ontological status in the imagination. Moreover, myth is inherently bound up with ethos or a culture's civilized life, and in so doing, grants knowledge which benefits community life. Horkheimer and Adorno use the Homeric myth of Odysseus to illustrate this point: "In reality Odysseus, the subject, denies his own identity, which makes him a subject, and preserves his life by mimicking the amorphous realm. He calls himself nobody because "Polyphemus" is not a self, and confusion of the name with the thing prevents the duped barbarian from escaping the trap".³⁰ This passage can be read as emblematic of the three features that allow mythic imagination to complement reason: a) it is self-referential or meta-analytical, b) non-veridical and c) practical as it grants knowledge about civic life. It is self-referential in so far as Odysseus refers to himself paradoxically as "not a self" and in so far as it is about what to call the self. It is non-veridical as Odysseus is not named "Polyphemus," and this convenient misrepresentation saves his life. These features complement reason because they depend upon reason's power to making meaning while highlighting its shortcomings.

Given Horkheimer and Adorno's account, the mythic imagination complements Enlightenment reason, and in fact is parasitic on Enlightenment's logos for its folly. Our getting the joke of Odysseus' name turns on there being conventions which are up-ended. "With advancing Enlightenment, only authentic works of art have been able to avoid the mere imitation of what already is".³¹ There is an irony in calling oneself by a name that means "not a self" in order to preserve one's life. There is a rupture with the so-called totality of Enlightenment reasoning. This use of irony, which calls attention

to the sometimes hollowness of language, gives rise to laughter. “Laughter, whether reconciled or terrible, always accompanies the moment when fear is ended. It indicates a release, whether from physical danger or from the grip of logic”.³²

Following the description of Odysseus, Horkheimer and Adorno write, “[t]he ambiguity of laughter is closely related to that of name; perhaps names are nothing more than petrified laughter, as nicknames still are—the only ones in which the original act of name-giving still persists. Laughter is in league with the guilt of subjectivity, but in the suspension of law which it announces it also points beyond that complicity”.³³ The act of name giving is analogous to their concerns about subsumptive reason violating the particular, the particular here meaning a specific person. On their account, nicknames retain some of the sensuous particularity not inherent in “generic” names such as Mary and Mike. When a person designates another person with a nickname, the two in the exchange most likely will know why the name was chosen, and thus through the act of nicknaming have a more intimate connection to that reason particular to their experience. For Horkheimer and Adorno, then the use of generic names is simply an instance of instrumental rationality, whereas the act of giving nicknames is self-referential, non-veridical, and practical—it requires an imaginative act.

On their account, this same dynamic is present with laughter. The double edges of laughter for Horkheimer and Adorno are: reconciled or good laughter and terrible or bad laughter. Terrible laughter, the mechanical laughter of the laugh track, is a tool of the culture industry. Laugh tracks are needed because “there is nothing to laugh at;” the audience must be tutored, their emotional response coaxed.³⁴ Since the culture industry is predicated on instrumental rationality which has the potential to stunt the mythic imagination, terrible laughter is a “medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe”.³⁵ That is, it allows us to cope with a rationally assimilated life “by defecting to the agencies which inspire it. It echoes the inescapability of power”.³⁶ This is not a reflective laughter, but a knee-jerk laughter that “makes laughter the instrument of cheating happiness”.³⁷ However, terrible laughter can make way for reconciled laughter. Horkheimer and Adorno claim that “if laughter up to now has been a sign of violence, an outbreak of blind, obdurate nature, it nevertheless contains the opposite element, in that through laughter the blind nature becomes aware of itself as such and thus abjures its destructive violence”.³⁸ Reconciled laughter is a mythic laughter—it “resounds with the echo of the escape from power”.³⁹ “Laughter about something is always laughter at it, and the vital force, according to Bergson, bursts through rigidity in laughter is, in truth, the irruption of barbarity, the self-assertion which, in convivial setting, dares to celebrate its liberation from scruple”.⁴⁰ Reconciled humour revels in the fact that “*res severa verum gaudium*” or true joy is a serious thing.⁴¹

It is at this point that we can read the text itself, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as an exercise in conciliatory laughter. The fragments are a combination of instrumental reason and mythic imagination. Horkheimer and Adorno use reason against reason while being provocative. If we interpret their hyperbole, then we can see how they are poking-fun at reason while simultaneously using it. It can be read as a bit tongue in cheek—true joy is a serious thing. In order to truly enjoy the text, one must try to use reason to make sense of it, but of course it is written in a way that frustrates reason. We can interpret the hyperbole in their descriptions of Enlightenment thinking as functioning humorously, and as being a parody of philosophy: a self-referential example of the type of humour that in fact can escape the so-called totality of Enlightenment rationality. The self-reference points to the content and to the process of representing, and as such does not mistake itself for telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and further their critique of the culture industry grants knowledge that should serve as a corrective to current practices. One might interpret *Dialectic of Enlightenment* itself as an exercise in integral freedom. That is, it provides a speculative unity—the text itself is intentionally difficult so that it resists closure—between the universal and the particular, the high and the low, the transcendent and the immanent, and as such invites citizens of liberal democratic states to regard themselves as something more than consumers. Moreover, such an account is open to the possibility that it is through the culture industry that the iron system might loosen its grip. The qualities that allow for speculative unity can present themselves in both low and high art. To be clear, it is not that mass art as a category because of its being mass art holds this potential, but only mass art that features the interplay of both mythos and logos which may give rise to reconciled laughter.

An example might make this point clearer. In the aftermath of the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks, many Americans were left wondering whether any sort of humour would be appropriate or whether it was an end to irony. The prevalent idea is that the only rational response to such devastation is to wallow in its enormity. Moreover, the plans for the attacks demonstrated the power of instrumental reason and how the products of modernity are indeed double-edged. One humorous response was deftly displayed by *The Onion's* infamous headline “God Angrily Clarifies Don’t Kill Rule” on September 26, 2001. The idea that those who attacked the U.S. did so as if it were God’s will is a meta-level description that refers to the horrible attacks without directly doing so. Of course, it is non-veridical as God held no such press conference; however this does not detract from the catharsis that *The Onion's* headline provided in its practical role as an outlet for the rage and grief engendered by the destruction. There were concerns voiced about how one can be funny in the aftermath of such devastation. But as Horkheimer and Adorno recognize, “through laughter the blind nature becomes aware of itself as such and thus abjures its destructive violence”.⁴² The satiric combination of mythos and lo-

gos confronted the worst of the human experience. The humour on display in *The Onion* was not terrible humour as it was not the sort of laugh-track response that aimed to sell a product. Satire in this sense is re-claiming its role as social critic and comforter. It recognizes the trauma inherent in instrumental reason in order to move beyond it. Reconciled humour must use reason as self-referential or meta-analytic, and it must not be a simple reduction or representation of a state of affairs, instead it aims to transcend the mere collection of facts that sometimes counts as knowledge to be beyond the veridical. Finally, in doing so, reconciled humour rendering reconciled laughter provides the critical distance for escaping the traps lay bare by a culture industry built upon instrumental reason. While such an account of humour may seem commonplace, given some of the successes of postmodernism, the observations about the power of humour in Horkheimer and Adorno predate it, and are important in the way they conceive of both the power and the limitations of instrumental reason. This is not irony for irony's sake, but rather an exercise in freedom.⁴³

stuttleross@uwlax.edu
golec.aaron@gmail.com

NOTES

1. Horkheimer and Adorno 1993, 3.
2. Idem, xi.
3. Bowie 2013, 2-10.
4. Habermas 1987.
5. Bowie 2013, 23.
6. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 4.
7. Habermas 1987.
8. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 63.
9. Idem, 66.
10. Idem, 64.
11. Idem, 19.
12. Idem, 3.
13. Idem, xviii.
14. Bowie 2013, 19.
15. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 21.
16. Idem, 66.
17. Idem, 23.
18. Idem, 6.
19. Idem, 2.
20. Idem, 94.
21. Idem, 33.
22. Horkheimer and Adorno 1993, 126.
23. Horkheimer and Adorno 1993, 126.
24. Idem, 212.
25. Adorno 2001, 166.
26. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 116.
27. Habermas 1987.
28. Horkheimer and Adorno 1993, 3.
29. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xvi.
30. Idem, 52.
31. Idem, 13.
32. Idem, 112.
33. Idem, 60.
34. Idem, 112.
35. Idem, 112.
36. Idem, 112.
37. Idem, 112.
38. Idem, 60.
39. Idem, 112.
40. Idem, 112.
41. Idem, 112.
42. Idem, 60.
43. Thanks are due to a reviewer of this journal.

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