SEDUCTION, COERCION, AND AN EXPLORATION OF EMBODIED FREEDOM

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This dissertation addresses how commodification as a seductive practice differs from commodification as a coercive practice, and why the distinction is ethically significant. Although commodification is often linked with technological progress, it has nonetheless been the focus of critiques which assert that many commodification practices can be considered coercive and, as such, are ethically suspect. Markedly less philosophical attention has been devoted to seductive practices which, despite their frequency of occurrence, are often overlooked or considered to be of little ethical concern. The thesis of this essay is that, in regard to commodification, the structural discrepancies between seduction and coercion are such that in widespread practice they yield different degrees of ethical ambiguity and without proper consideration this significant difference can remain undetected or ignored, thus establishing or perpetuating systems of unjust domination and oppression. I argue that a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction has occurred in widespread commodification practices, that seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion, and that any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element.

Drawing on Theodor Adorno’s aesthetic methodology as an approach to working with coercion and seduction within the framework of commodification, I begin by clarifying the main concepts of the argument and what is meant by the use of the term “critical” in this context. Next I present evidence for a paradigm shift in the systemic structure of commodification and argue for the need to recognize the ethical significance of seductive practices. I then apply the main argument to issues of freedom in
contemporary bioethics by examining narratives pertaining to pharmaceutical
development and sales.

The aim of this dissertation is to show that by distinguishing between seduction
and coercion as distinct modes of commodification, ethicists will have a stronger grasp
on how commodification functions, its connection to oppressive frameworks, and the
ways in which problematic practices can be resisted or overcome.
For Don, with gratitude
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INTRODUCTION

(i) The Problem Addressed and the Main Thesis of the Essay

This essay aims to address how commodification as a seductive practice differs from commodification as a coercive practice and why it is ethically significant. The distinction is important because although there have been numerous critiques of commodification that examine coercion, comparatively less attention has been paid to similar concerns regarding seduction. Yet instances of commodification as a seductive practice may be just as or even more pervasive in various personal, social, institutional, or economic contexts.

The thesis of this essay is that, in regard to commodification, the structural discrepancies between seduction and coercion are such that in practice they yield different degrees of ethical ambiguity and without proper consideration this significant difference can remain undetected or ignored, thus establishing or perpetuating systems of unjust domination and oppression. More succinctly, my position is that a fundamental paradigm shift has occurred in the prevalence of these two types of commodification practices and that from an ethical standpoint this move away from coercive practices to the now more common seductive practices is no less troubling. To the contrary, ethicists who might otherwise be adept at recognizing coercive structures run the risk of overlooking the mechanizations of seduction that can initially seem to provide greater freedom, but ultimately inhibit freedom in many of the same ethically problematic manners commonly found in cases of coercion.

The main argument in support of this thesis is as follows:
1) If a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction has occurred in widespread commodification practices, then seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion.

2) If seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion, then any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element.

Therefore, 3) if a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction has occurred in widespread commodification practices, then any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element.

The argument establishes the relevance of the problem to ethical thought and asserts the insufficiency of addressing commodification without taking seduction into account. Although coercive and seductive practices often exhibit similar features, it is not uncommon for ethicists to relegate aspects more closely related to seduction, such as enticement or psychological manipulation, to positions of secondary concern or even irrelevancy. My focus here differs from much of what has been done previously by asserting that insofar as they impinge upon freedom, the peculiarities of seductive practices are deserving of further ethical scrutiny, particularly in regard to the systemic frameworks of commodification that shape much of contemporary existence. To this end, then, by stating that any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element, “critical” is not meant to merely indicate a crucial or important aspect of a theory. Rather, “critical element” will be employed in a richer
sense, pointedly as a distinct methodological practice outlined by Theodor Adorno which, via critique, endeavors to bring forth overlooked or ignored grounds for ethical consideration.

(ii) Key Distinctions within the Essay and Their Bearing on the Problem Under Consideration

Three key concepts are at the center of the main argument of this essay: commodification, coercion, and seduction. Despite the numerous interesting facets and manifestations of seduction and coercion that could be explored, in order to effectively address the gravity they hold for systemic structures of commodification the scope of this thesis concentrates primarily on their relation to the commodifying practices in which they typically appear.

a. Commodification

By commodification I mean to refer to practices that attempt to treat goods and services as well as aspects of human life according to values and principles of exchange associated with market-based economies. Whereas it may not necessarily be the case that all forms of commodification are either coercive or seductive, a tendency to view human life in these terms can result in conceptual frameworks that exhibit characteristics of each. This then gives rise to the question: Is seduction distinct from coercion, or is seduction a form of coercion? The problem that emerges in attempting to answer this question is that ethicists may be inclined to approach situations pertaining to seduction according to standards and procedures which were initially formulated specifically for coercion. In practice, however, if these commonly employed standards fail to reflect the significant differences between the two, then they are inadequate for
reaching warranted, reliable conclusions about seduction. Similarly, without an attunement to their distinct mechanisms, instances of commodification as a seductive practice may remain largely overlooked or undetected altogether.

b. *Coercion*

Coercion can be defined as the process of initiating behaviors which are involuntarily compelled, generally through intimidation and the threat of harm. This fairly narrow definition of coercion is heavily yoked to the notion of direct actions having direct consequences. However, coercion can also be defined in a broader sense by being conceptualized as a form of domination which leads to injustice and oppression. Considered in this broad sense, coercive practices may result in indirect or seemingly less obvious consequences that may in due course be deemed no less important than more overt instances of unjust oppression.

c. *Seduction*

Seduction, by comparison, is more difficult to classify. Like coercion, it is a manipulative practice that deliberately attempts to bring about certain behaviors with little regard for the well-being of its target. Yet unlike coercion, or at least coercion defined in the narrow sense, seduction follows a different procedural model, relying primarily on allure and enticement rather than overt force or intimidation to obtain results. This gives rise to something of an ethical gray area. On one hand, the role of enticement as a motivating factor could be taken to imply that seduction involves a greater degree of voluntary participation than is available in acts of coercion. On the other hand, and again comparable to coercion, an asymmetrical power differential may be found in seduction as well as an inherently deceptive quality that renders the
ability to attain fully informed, voluntary consent impossible. Since these contradictory claims to voluntarism and the implied autonomous ability to freely choose for one’s self apparently cancel each other out, relying on this chief component in distinguishing a coercive from a non-coercive act initially yields inconclusive results. Thus, seductive practices can be distinguished from coercive practices in significant procedural respects, yet they also exhibit the potential to overlap with one another in ways that are ethically relevant. That is to say, regardless of whether or not seductive practices can be said to be coercive in the narrowest sense of the word, they nonetheless share similarly manipulative characteristics that render them ethically problematic in ways that can quite often, be deemed worthy of the same ethical concerns, criticisms, and condemnations that generally attach to coercive practices. However, the perceived ambiguity surrounding seduction frequently complicates matters of judgment, or permits seductive practices to remain undetected or unchallenged altogether.

Since this ambiguity suggests that neither seduction nor coercion can be fully contained within simple ethical categories, this not only calls into question how both are understood but also presents an opportunity to rethink as well as reformulate: a) how they are characterized as forces of domination and b) the ways in which systems of unjust domination can be resisted or opposed.

(iii) Previous Attempts to Address this Issue and its Continued Current Relevance

As stated previously, despite the fact that addressing the ethical dimensions and implications of commodification is a project which has been broached before, I contend that it remains just as relevant to current philosophical discourse as it has in the past. A great deal of philosophical attention has been paid to the topic of commodification since the publication of
Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*. In this work Marx, as part of his larger critique on capitalism and the relationship between human labor and the creation of value, puts forth what has come to be regarded as a landmark theorization of economic commodification.\(^1\) Although they do not always agree with or follow Marxian principles as a whole, numerous post-modern and post-structuralist thinkers still make use of Marx’s notion of commodity in addressing sociopolitical power dynamics and prevailing social conventions.\(^2\) Many of these thinkers, particularly those working in areas of social philosophy, feminism, and post-colonial theory, are united by a common concern that commodification is being employed with increasing frequency and that it is a practice which continues to encroach into areas heretofore deemed incapable of or off-limits to economic quantification. For this reason, commodification is often looked upon disparagingly as a dehumanizing and broadly coercive process that results in individuals being treated, not simply as consumers in an overarching economic system but even, in some respect, as consumable goods themselves.

The topic of seduction has also recently regained serious philosophical attention and is examined by thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Lipovetsky, and others.

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\(^2\) I wish to note that the use of the terms “post-modern” and “post-structural” is meant to be, somewhat loosely, descriptive of thinkers whose work is frequently noted by a shared lineage of Continental European philosophy that either rejects or breaks away from the commitments of modernism or structuralism, respectively. They are, in many ways, terms of convenience as no specific set of characteristics defines either and attempts to classify specific philosophers according to these labels can be problematic.
These figures share an academic lineage known for struggling with problems which are held to be deeply couched in the view that contemporary life is greatly influenced by forces of commodification and mass consumption. What is surprising here is not that their respective characterizations of seduction vary from each other, which they certainly do, so much as the degree to which they sometimes diverge from the overwhelmingly reproachful picture of commodification as a coercive practice. Given a seducer’s tendency to exert a certain amount of influence or involuntary sway over the target of seduction, one might initially think that these philosophical accounts of seductive practices would likely be viewed to parallel or even “map onto” descriptions of commodification as a coercive practice. To the contrary, at times seduction is described as something so foreign to the common depictions of coercion that seduction appears to function altogether differently, with entirely dissimilar ethical implications, if any at all. Hence, in setting out to reconsider these issues, particularly in regard to the influence they shed upon commodification and the ethical realm, it seems as though a good deal of space still remains for conducting new philosophical work geared toward investigating this problem.

(iv) Methodology

The principal approach of this essay draws extensively on the work of Theodor Adorno. This is for several reasons. Adorno’s landmark research on commodification remains highly influential today and it would be remiss not to acknowledge it in any work that deals significantly with commodification and mass culture. Yet beyond this acknowledgement, Adorno’s work is especially germane to this essay in that it provides a framework from which to address commodification as a coercive practice that also allows for new work on the ethical ambiguity of seduction, a subject he broaches briefly but not nearly in the same level of detail in
which he considers coercion. Chiefly, Adorno develops a concept of critique that is to be employed as a philosophical method of ethical inquiry and judgment.

a. Adorno’s Robust Use of the Term “Critical” as Ethical Critique

“Critical” in Adorno’s sense of the word is not to be taken to either merely imply necessity or as just an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, but rather as a comportment toward and reflection on underlying assumptions and biases that can hinder social justice. When a critical element is absent from a theory of commodification, it becomes self-referential in the sense that it lacks a procedure by which to examine its own unrealized standards and goals. For Adorno, an ethical dimension is implicit in this process, as it addresses the reality of human suffering at the hands of unjust domination even amidst the promise that the technological breakthroughs driving commodified production practices seemingly hold for increasing individual freedom and ridding the world of various social ills. Thus, Adorno’s substantial attention to commodification in conjunction with his robust sense of the term “critical” is pivotal to my project of plumbing the ethical implications of a shift from coercive to seductive practices in commodification.

Moreover, Adorno’s aesthetic theory is employed here as an entranceway into critical reflection on how the ambiguity of seduction depends upon the contextual character of commodification in various forms, and the recognition that these contexts involve the specific social and socio-economic practices in which they are likely to occur. Unlike many works in the aesthetic tradition that preceded his contributions, Adorno’s aesthetic theory is not predominantly concerned with questions of beauty or the sublime and he instead concentrates on the connections between society and art. In this way his theory can function as an applied
aesthetics, for approaching art in this way gives rise to ethical considerations by cutting across
disciplines in a manner that sheds fresh light on societal contradictions that often indicate
domination, oppression, and suffering.

According to Adorno, art can be a vehicle through which structural contradictions and
forms of oppression come to be exposed. Artworks are to be approached, Adorno suggests, by
beginning within an individual work of art and then engaging with the questions that appear to
arise upon reflection on that piece. He contrasts “autonomous art,” or art which is capable of
raising questions by bringing these tensions and contradictions to our attention, against a model
of art presented primarily as the products of a shrewdly coercive “culture industry” which instead
provides mass-produced and relatively non-challenging commodities as entertainment for mass
society.

Once again, this contrast is not incidental to his overall project, and through it a bridge is
made between the aesthetic and the ethical. Adorno’s aesthetic writings help to define a model
of interpretive critique that is central to developing a critical methodology. One chief aspect of
this kind of immanent critique is that its goal is to expose the effects of what Adorno terms
“identity thinking,” as a type of thought which subsumes the particular beneath a general concept
and thus obliterates its singularity. In one sense, identity thinking is a useful tool of predication
that helps organize and navigate the world, as in the example, “The teapot is white.” In another
sense, it can be reasonably descriptive and specific while still not fully encapsulating the
particularity of what it denotes. For comparison, consider the phrase, “John is white.” John may
or may not either self-identify with this statement or match up with a set of externally imposed
criteria of what it means for a human being to be viewed as “white.” Yet already the added level
of complexity, perceived race or ethnicity, starts to point toward the inadequacy of stating that
John *is* X. What is meant by X, how has the understanding of X been socially constructed, and what happens to the singularity of John in this instance? What assumptions are embedded in such a term? In other words, what, or who, is included in a definition of “white” or “whiteness?” What, or who, is excluded and how? Essentially, what Adorno is claiming is that in such examples there is still a remainder, by which he means something left out or excluded in what is ostensibly being classified in concept. The illustration given above suggests an indeterminacy that can be ethically problematic if it is taken as a conclusive, determinate fact.

To be more precise, what concerns Adorno is certainly not every single instance of utilizing the concept of identity so much as when conceptual subsumption becomes uncritically applied such that it becomes entwined with power and domination. That is to say, he is suspicious of systems that group individual people into different categories and then proceed to lose sight of the individuality of the members of that group. Misrepresenting or losing sight of uniqueness can, he contends, be recognized as a stepping stone for de-humanization and objectification that leads to unjust domination. Adorno’s critique of identity thinking is therefore to be considered as calling for active reflection on the many forms that these kinds of potentially problematic conceptual mechanisms can take so as to undo or avoid the systematic exclusion or forgetting of relevant and significant details that might otherwise play a role in facilitating injustice and suffering.

Critique of this kind thus involves a dialectic which aims to recover the negative, the part that is forgotten, overlooked, or withdraws from appropriation. Adorno’s methodological approach has much in common with feminism, disability theory, and postcolonial theories, all of which have unique foci but nonetheless share similar aspirations of recovery and affirmation in approaching ethical theory from non-traditional perspectives. This method has been adopted
here in order to show that the ethical questions that emerge from a consideration of certain
elements in relation to freedom and embodied individuals are to first be considered as tensions
rather than strict dichotomies of right versus wrong. At the same time, these tensions are not to
be mistaken for a hopeless gridlock and should instead be looked upon as a call for a more
rigorous consideration of what is being posed to the public as allegedly liberating in concept but
may, in fact, involve foreclosing possibilities and limiting choices for one’s self or others.
It should also be noted that there are limitations to art’s efficacy as a stimulus for change.
Namely, it is not being suggested that art should be held up as a great and mighty catalyst for
revolution or societal liberation. First, this would appear to be an overly-optimistic reading of
Adorno’s intentions. Not only did Adorno express disdain for what he deemed to be overtly
politically didactic art, he also sternly questioned whether “autonomous art” was even possible in
a highly commodified society much less held out too much Utopian hope for its transformative
power if it were.\footnote{3 The Utopian aspects occasionally found in Adorno’s thought are mainly posed as imaginaries, meant to spark thought on possibilities rather than a single, achievable end.}  Second, such a grand pronouncement is also not a claim of this essay. Art is
being used here as a methodological entranceway, an interpretive tool that fosters the application
of Adorno’s theory to the social and socio-economic practices in which coercion and seduction
are commonly embedded.

To accomplish this, each chapter of the essay features a keystone image and begins with a
short discussion of the dialectic tensions that the piece suggests. For example, critically
considering a piece that illustrates the tensions between the conflicting interests of the
pharmaceutical industry and the embodied individual can aid in addressing related societal
concerns by offering caveats against continuing current practices as well as pointing to
possibilities for proceeding from this point. These images were chosen specifically for this project because they exhibit formal as well as thematic qualities that readily lend themselves to a consideration of commodification as a seductive practice. The first three images present a gradual progression of systemic commodification as something increasingly reliant on forces of seduction. The fourth and final image facilitates a return to the basic tenets of the thesis in a bioethical application that discusses commodification as a seductive practice in relation to individual freedom and the body. The inclusion of these images at the front of each chapter introduces subsequent genealogical work which situates specific practices in various cultural, social, and socio-economic contexts. Hence, although he also provides a philosophical backdrop to the questions at hand, the main rationale for employing Adorno’s work, and his aesthetic theory in particular, is the contention that it provides a useful methodology for ethicists seeking broader, interdisciplinary critical reflection on societal tensions that might otherwise go unnoticed or ignored.

(v) What This Essay Aims to Accomplish: The Thesis, Revisited

Even if it is accepted that seduction need not be considered as merely another form of coercion and that all of the ethical concerns that tend to get attached to coercive practices should not be immediately ascribed to seduction, it might be asked: what is the purpose of probing this distinction further? What can be gained from teasing out this distinction within a highly commodified society? The problem that the thesis of this essay addresses is twofold. First of all, over-exaggerating or holding too rigidly to the distinction between seduction and coercion, while failing to recognize the nuances of seduction that denote the potential to exhibit seemingly coercive properties, greatly increases the likelihood of mistakenly assuming that
commodification as a seductive practice is harmless and ethically irrelevant in all or most situations. Yet the alternative is no less problematic, for attempting to collapse seduction completely into coercion does not account for the procedural mechanism that renders it distinct from coercion. Hence, taking this tack would result in a skewed representation of how commodification operates. That is, by discounting the role that enticement plays in seduction, this alternative is prone to underestimating or overlooking noteworthy and unique ways in which human life can be drawn into and subsequently caught within mechanisms outside of one’s control. Consequently, I argue that by acknowledging that there are modes of commodification which could be better typified as seductive rather than coercive in practice, it becomes possible to develop a richer understanding of how the characterization of these concepts can impact the recognition and understanding of oppressive conceptual frameworks as well as possible ways to address and resist them.

(vi) Brief Summaries of the Individual Chapters

The chapters of this essay are organized in the following manner: The first chapter begins by clarifying the key concepts of the main argument and what is meant by the term “critical” in particular. Adorno’s aesthetic methodology is discussed as an approach to working with the concepts of coercion and seduction within the framework of commodification. The second and third chapters are dedicated to defending the first and second premises of the main argument. The fourth chapter applies the main argument to issues of freedom in contemporary bioethics. Chapter five presents a number of concluding remarks.

The motivation of Chapter One is to present Adorno’s notions of critique and critical reflection in order to illuminate the ways in which conceptual frameworks may appear to
champion a progressive freedom yet at the same time paradoxically limit the choices and self-determination of the individuals they allege to emancipate. Specifically, the main claim being argued is that addressing the difference between commodification as a coercive practice and commodification as a seductive practice is important to recognizing the mechanisms by which the systematic constitution or exclusion of individuals can lead to dangerous ideologies that profess to provide greater freedom for human life while simultaneously fostering injustice in practice.

Chapter Two focuses on the premise that if a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction has occurred in widespread commodification practices, then seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion. The impact that seductive practices can have on human embodiment and freedom is addressed as well as the pervasiveness of commodification in contemporary life. The work of Gilles Lipovetsky is employed to establish how fashion has become a mode of commodified seduction that has a tremendous influence on individual life and society at large. However, in reconsidering commodification and structures of oppression, Lipovetsky rejects the notion that this is cause for ethical concern, thus creating a potential objection to the argument of this essay. A brief response to Lipovetsky is presented with a discussion of why it is matters whether seduction receives serious ethical consideration or not.

A more detailed response to Lipovetsky’s potential objection is launched in Chapter Three, and takes the form of defending the premise that if seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion, then any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element. This response if foregrounded by a closer examination of art, the moving image, and commodity in order to more firmly establish the prevalence of seductive practices and why they sometimes elude ethical attention. The contention that seduction is
pervasive in commodification practices is affirmed, but not Lipovetsky’s conclusion that it is
either ethically irrelevant or at times, even desirable. Lipovetsky’s position is challenged by
appealing to Giorgio Agamben’s work which, counter to Lipovetsky, provides evidence that
totalitarianism is still a great concern today. It is argued that totalitarian methods are very much
in evidence, but that they often manifest in different forms than might be expected. Chapter
Three then concludes with this response to Lipovetsky but while also noting that although
Agamben serves as a worthy foil to Lipovetsky’s view on the implications of seduction, as with
Adorno, Agamben’s work has not yet paid serious enough attention to commodification as a
seductive practice.

Chapter Four seeks to close the gap between these two approaches by applying this
argument to contemporary bioethics. This is undertaken via an examination of a paradigm shift
in the manufacturing and marketing of pharmaceutical drugs which, it is argued, maps on to the
paradigm shift between commodification as a coercive practice and commodification as a
seductive practice. Throughout, attention is paid to the human body as an intersection of
commodification and freedom. It is argued that seduction is ethically problematic when its
promise of freedom is, in actuality, largely employed as another means of limitation and control
that unjustly hinders one’s self or others. In considering the future, then, a narrative of the
Human Genome Project and the notion of druggable space are examined through a Postcolonial
lens in order to illustrate how commodification is being inscribed into ever more intimate parts
of the body. This dissertation closes in Chapter Five with a brief conclusion and a number of
final remarks on the project as a whole by reaffirming that a paradigm shift has occurred and as
such, bioethicists are charged with the task of taking commodification seriously or else risk an
increased likelihood of committing significant errors in theory and practice.

"Cornell’s shadow boxes invite us to peek, to peep, and finally yield to our imagination. We fall into the position of the voyeur – compelled or seduced, what does it matter? We meet in the confines of this tiny frame, this box, this microcosm of complicity."

-- Mary Ann Caws, 1993, p.36.
CHAPTER 1: SEDUCTION AND THE INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGE OF CRITIQUE

(i) Introduction

A principal claim of this essay is that, when addressing commodification practices, any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element. The term “critical” can be interpreted in different ways. For example, “critical” could simply indicate a high level of significance. On this reading, a theory would be missing a key or crucial element and, as such, would be deficient in its ability to address issues pertaining to commodification. Or the term “critical” might denote a method of judgment. In this case, a theory lacking a critical element would be without a means of analysis with which to sufficiently evaluate merits and faults. Both of these interpretations are rather limited in scope, however, and neither makes an explicit connection to ethics. By contrast, in Theodor Adorno’s work, the term critical acquires a more robust meaning that is directly tied to ethical engagement. Through his theory of aesthetic critique, and his notion of autonomous art within that theory, Adorno puts forth a method for ethical interrogation and discernment. This conception of aesthetic critique is all the more relevant to this essay given that it is very much entwined with an in-depth examination of commodification. Moreover, Adorno’s notion of the term critical exceeds its application to art and this conceptual framework can also be applied as a method of social critique with ethical efficacy.

The main objective of this chapter is to clarify how “critical” is to be understood within this argument. By turning to Adorno’s method of aesthetic critique, the intention is to provide an explanation of how a critical theory can also function as an ethical one. This explanation of Adorno’s theoretical framework, which will be tied directly to commodification, creates a pathway for my claim that commodification is not to be characterized chiefly by coercive
practices, as it has often been in the past. Rather, my contention is that seductive practices have largely been ignored in the consideration of commodification. The significance of this oversight is defended in this essay and is addressed by advocating for a critical approach to commodification that acknowledges the difference between coercive and seductive practices and the bearing that this difference has on the potential for liberation from systemic forces of unjust domination.

(ii) Adorno’s Concept of Aesthetic Critique

a. Dialectical Tensions in Art and Life: an Illustration of Critical Reflection on Art

In order to elucidate Adorno’s concept of aesthetic critique, or how art can serve as a vehicle for social critique with ethical consequences, it is useful to begin with an example that brings forth the dialectical tensions that underlie the thesis of this essay. A reflection on the unresolved tensions in an artwork such as Joseph Cornell’s *Untitled (Butterfly Habitat)* demonstrates Adorno’s contention that art provides an opportunity for speculative critique. Since Cornell’s assemblages frequently exhibit elements of irony and juxtaposition, they seem particularly well-suited to the purpose of discussion in relation to Adorno’s critical theory, which makes use of both in his definition of autonomous art. Of course, because Adorno never publicly commented on the works of Cornell, it cannot be assumed that he would sanction any contentions to the affinity with his philosophical writings that I am proposing here. Adorno is, in fact, quite particular about what he deems worthy of being characterized as “autonomous,” “modern,” or “avant-garde” art, and this stringency has given rise to a profuse amount of secondary commentary in which no shortage of effort has been devoted to taking him to task for his discriminations. It is not my intention to revisit these issues here but simply to contend that constructive insights can be gleaned from a bi-directional comparison of their respective
projects. Rather, it will be shown that making use of Cornell’s work as an entryway into a
discussion of Adorno’s distinct critical methodology suggests a number of intriguing
interdisciplinary parallels in regard to Adorno’s delineation of “autonomous art” as well as
several other key concepts in his thought.

In Cornell’s assemblage *Untitled (Butterfly Habitat)* a shadow box is fronted by a glass
panel divided into six frosted windows, each providing a peephole view onto one of six
individually mounted butterflies. Although the grid-like ordering of three-dimensional space
pays tribute to the techniques of cubist formalism and constructivism, this structural austerity is
destabilized by the internal apertures that arise from a surrealistic use of *objet trouvé* as
associative imagery. From a distance, fragmented glimpses of butterfly wings provide an
escapist allure of longing for flight and possibility. Their partial obfuscation beckons the viewer
to look inside, as a passerby might be attracted to the snow-dusted windows of holiday shop
displays. Indeed, the intimacy of the space within suggests nostalgia for the prizes and pastimes
of yesteryear, a childlike pursuit of collection and wonder for the exotic. Nonetheless, it is a
nostalgia unnerved by the perpetual stasis of the specimen, as the treasures of even a youthful,
budding scientist speak to an impulse to capture, classify, and ultimately, master nature. Viewed
as nature contained, an awareness of the butterfly’s frailty is heightened, seemingly in evidence
to the fleeting character of its life and susceptibility to external forces. On closer inspection,
however, it becomes clear that these objects are not really butterflies at all but paper replicas,
salvaged bits of commercial ephemera that further complicate any attempt to differentiate
between existence and ornament. Rich in metaphor but obscure in meaning, Cornell’s
characteristic use of juxtaposition in constructive technique and thematic imagery invites
discussion on the number of tensions that are sustained in his work. Cornell’s box constructions
reveal a dialectic of the intimate and the mundane in which themes of fragmentation, nostalgia, and unresolved longing are elicited through second hand objects, ephemera, and other cast offs of consumerism. For example, the images of birds and butterflies in Cornell’s Habitat series frame a sustained tension between the disclosure and enclosure of life. Intimations of vivacity, caprice, and metaphoric flights of fancy are offset, sometimes subtly if not overtly, by more disturbing allusions to capture, control, and death. The viewer is drawn into the evocative interiority of the space set within the material externality of the assemblage, only to be confronted with an internal dynamic that challenges the very distinction between interior and exterior, subject and object.

In this regard, even interaction with the work itself seems to give rise to a sort of experiential tension between seduction and coercion. Does it intimate ways in which people are seduced by the allure of objects or images in their everyday lives? Or perhaps they are coerced in some sense, caught within the structures that order life in the world. Through the consideration of this perceived tension, a more fundamental question emerges: Is seduction distinct from coercion, or is seduction a form of coercion?

As I will demonstrate, this question resists a simple or complete resolution. Yet it bears serious consideration, for by examining the characteristics of seduction and coercion it becomes possible to better recognize assumptions and uncertainties pertaining to the ways in which we come to understand freedom and ethical relationships. For this reason, I will examine the problem that this example has brought forward; namely, that the difficulty in delineating between the ethical implications of coercion and seduction is due in no small part to the contextual character of each and that they typically appear very much entwined with social and socio-economic practices. In this effort I will initially be drawing heavily on Adorno’s concept of
aesthetic critique in order to explain what it means for a theory to contain a critical element. I
will explain how critical readings of artworks such as the one presented above can serve as
useful tools for ethical reflection in themselves, but are also couched within a larger theoretical
framework for approaching coercive practices in an era which, Adorno contends, is primarily
influenced by systemic structures of commodification and consumerism.

Again, the main argument of this essay states that:

1) If a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction has occurred in widespread
commodification practices, then seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical
consideration as coercion.

2) If seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion, then any
ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element.

3) Therefore, if a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction has occurred in widespread
commodification practices, then any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into
account is lacking a critical element.

Adorno’s thought plays a significant role in defending this argument by presenting three
well-developed and influential foci from which to approach these premises:  a) a conceptual
consideration on the philosophical notions linking coercion and commodification, b) a sketch of
what has previously been regarded as paradigmatically constitutive of widespread
commodification practices, and most importantly, c) a critical methodology that can be adapted
for continued use today. The third focus, the critical methodology, has strong ties to his notion
of aesthetic critique.

b. Adorno’s Robust Sense of “Critical” as Critical Reflection
Art, in Adorno’s schema, represents one way of fostering a critical perspective. By this he means to say that reflecting on the various and often contradictory interpretations that a work of art posits, the act of assuming an interpretive stance in relation to art serves as a forerunner for speculative critique on appearance and reality in the world. Through modes of juxtaposition, paradox, or irony, art is able to call attention to masked ideologies, functioning as though it were exposing plastered-over cracks in totalizing power structures of absolute affirmation which might otherwise go unnoticed or unquestioned. In other words, Adorno holds that systemic forms of oppression are revealed in fragmentary ways, one of which is through art.

The interpretation of art can play a crucial role in revealing and responding to oppressive cultural dynamics. However, seemingly prefiguring the work of Michel Foucault, Adorno recognizes that an inherent facet of cultural criticism is that it is inextricably linked to the culture in which it is undertaken. Attempting to impose a transcendent method of critique as though one could stand outside of or remain independent from all past social experiences is thus fated to inaccuracy by its own abstractions. Likewise, one does not approach art in isolation, but from a position of limited, contextualized knowledge.

Given this inevitable aspect of critical interpretation, Adorno asserts that in order for criticism to be effective it must take the form of immanent critique. Immanent critique, when employed in philosophy, focuses on a particular project or field of discourse and emphasizes the importance of closely examining and then reflecting upon an understanding of its characteristic projects and practices. Specifically, the qualities, values and standards that are allegedly being embodied in concept are juxtaposed against any evidence of their incongruity with how they are manifested in actuality. A non-essentialist approach, its rationale is not just to state limitations or condemn past failures but also to illuminate available, unrealized possibilities.
In employing the basic model of immanent critique in the domain of art, Adorno hopes to avoid the conceptual biases commonly found in more transcendent critiques and aesthetic theories, and he emphasizes the importance of beginning with and endeavoring to think from within particular works of art. Thus, to be “critical” in this sense means striving to identify formal antinomies, the mutually incompatible tensions that a work seems to suggest. The next stage to be discussed, reflecting on how those tensions compare to the dominant ideologies in society, demonstrates how Adorno ties the critical to the ethical.

c. Critical Reflection as a Method of Ethical Inquiry and Judgment

Actively engaging in critical reflection on art, Adorno claims, can reveal troubling contradictions within conceptual and societal frameworks. He maintains that a work’s social import or meaning can only be understood insofar as it is considered in opposition to its functional role amidst a socioeconomic and political background. Yet according to Adorno, all art is not equally suited to the task of critical interpretation. Rather, autonomous art holds a privileged position in this process.

In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno defines autonomous art as art which, although situated in society, is independent from and antithetical to social processes (Adorno, 1997, p.8). Sustained by inner tensions that point to contradictions, dialectic struggle, and paradoxical truth, it is autonomous art, therefore, that poses a critical challenge to social consciousness by providing access to meaning while simultaneously refusing to be reduced to a simple meaning alone.

For Adorno, whether or not a Cornell assemblage, or any artwork, can be considered “autonomous” depends largely upon a work’s ability to disturb one’s perceptions of existing

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1 According to Adorno, this is because art emerges in the mimetic spontaneity that occurs as a dialectic between historicity and the artist’s attempts to dominate material existence.
social structures as well as to suggest possibilities for how they could be otherwise. The efficacy of art lies in its ability to, “determine changes in society, albeit,” he adds, “in a subterranean, invisible fashion” (AA, p.155). Just as a careful consideration of Cornell’s Habitat reveals aspects of the work which are disconcertingly irreconcilable with its ostensibly formal unity, Adorno contends that autonomous art can disclose troubling contradictions within conceptual and societal frameworks.

Attesting to an antinomical, antagonistic yet indivisible duality, autonomous artworks can be described, in Adorno’s terms, as “socially culpable,” “windowless” monads that prefigure the possibility of critical reflection (AA, pp. 252-3 and AT, p.64). Art is monadic to the degree that, instead of simply reflecting the artist’s subjective viewpoint, the artist is able to objectify the work of art by struggling to reveal a truth that is otherwise unsayable (AT, p.258). This occurs through an ongoing process of dialectic engagement between material or formal construction and mimetic content (AT, p.65). Mimesis, in Adorno’s theory, is not to be thought of as being limited to a rigidly imitative sense of mimetic representation through mechanistic reproduction or mindless repetition. Rather, the mimetic impulse to remake reality is further associated with such things as spontaneity, play, and the unpredictable as they emerge through the conciliatory force of the artist’s individual creative viewpoint amidst the interconnectedness of life within the material world (AT, pp.64-5). The artwork as a whole, therefore, is imbued with both the practical rationality necessitated by the imperatives of artistic production and the spontaneous emergence of unique, uninhibited or chance elements of human imagination and sensation. The finished piece is neither bound solely to the artist’s intended meaning nor consigned to fulfilling an instrumental purpose in the everyday social order.
Its monadic character notwithstanding, there is also a social dimension to art. Through relationships of labor and material content, it is always situated by the socio-historical context in which the artist is working (AA, p.242). In this manner, at least to some extent, in any work of art an ideological dimension is unavoidable (AA, p.253). Despite this social culpability, autonomous art is distinguished by an aspect of irreconcilability that remains resistant to totalizing ideologies or the pull toward any synthetic unity. Its sociality, which is antagonistic instead of cooperative, could perhaps be characterized as socially deviant or subversive in nature.

To put it another way, autonomous art has the curious constitution whereby it is social precisely because it is monadic and vice versa. Its mimetic spontaneity, Max Paddison asserts, is "achieved only through the most rigorous control and domination of its material – that is, of ‘nature’ as ‘second nature’" (Paddison, 1993, p.58). As mimetic “second nature,” Paddison explains, art’s task is to regain the promise of freedom, beauty, and immediacy of nature and recoup that which has been “outlawed and repressed” in society by rescuing them, negatively, through critique and in opposition to “the dominant means-end rationality” which deems art useless, or lacking purpose in any practical sense (Paddison, 1993, p.58). In this way, according to Adorno, its purposive end is not to have an instrumental purpose, but just the opposite:

By congealing into an entity unto itself - rather than obeying existing social norms and thus proving itself to be 'socially useful' - art criticizes society just by being there (AA, p.242).

Reflecting on itself and by itself, while at the same time indirectly commenting on the world, the autonomous work critically addresses society in the negative, by showing it for what it is not. Initiating a momentary tremor of fear or unsettlement, art temporarily displaces the human ego by shaking the commonly accepted social foundations upon which it has come to depend for
grounding its own constitution (AA, pp. 257-8). Art fractures one’s perception of the world as given and calls for the reinterpretation of fragments of meaning that fall outside of traditional frameworks of experience.

Comprehending the potential power of art as a negative force rather than a positive, creative one is why, on Adorno’s view, exemplary art of its time tends to be distinguished by its dissonance. This dissonance need not be outlandish, however, and cannot be didactic or contrived. Indeed, he holds that works created purely to elicit an immediate response of shock or for blatant political impetus surrender their autonomy to utility. Having made an explicit commitment at the outset, alterity is always already excluded by the artist’s direct engagement in self-censorship. Hence, these types of “committed” artworks lapse into propaganda, commonplace moralizing or deceptive distraction. The autonomous work, on the other hand, presents a genuine challenge to one’s understanding and acceptance of the appearance of reality as the status quo. Its power lies not in its aptitude to precisely convey an intended message, so much as in its ability to facilitate a heightened sense of awareness that summons a response.

Cornell’s work presents an opportunity to consider how art can provide an opportunity for critical reflection in this manner. Anne d'Harnoncourt observes that in the various works of Cornell’s Habitat series, some of which bear explicit dedications to Juan Gris, there is a strong resemblance between Cornell’s use of space and how Cubists such as Picasso and Gris began to push the boundaries of the traditional two-dimensional still life (d'Harnoncourt, 1978, p.12). The crowning achievement of a Gris masterpiece, d'Harnoncourt asserts, is the illusion of an open window within a flattened, abstract composition which thus makes it difficult to discern which is more “real”: the “vivid naturalism” and seemingly “deeper space” of the background or the, “fractured but solidly painted still-life objects in the foreground” (d'Harnoncourt, 1978, p.12).
Cornell’s placement of images, d'Harnoncourt claims, has the same purpose as in the Cubist work, namely that of confounding reality by, “at once denying and reinforcing the artificiality of the space he has created within the three sides of his box” (d'Harnoncourt, 1978, p.13).

Although made in reference to one specific example where Cornell positions the image of a parrot against a background of clouds, d'Harnoncourt’s assertion is arguably just as applicable to the birds and butterflies found in other Cornell Habitat boxes, all of which achieve a similar effect through an interaction between the fragmented images.

The paradoxical character of Cubism leads Adorno to regard it as a paradigmatic model for the potentiality of autonomous disclosure.² By employing disjointed planes and splintered images to simultaneously depict an object or scene from a plurality of perspectives, the illusive truth of an object’s totality is, ironically, exposed through the disconcerting fragmentation of the cubist aesthetic. In effect, despite the undeniable artificiality of the Cubist depiction it still speaks to reality and perhaps more astutely than in conventionally “realistic” or literal renderings.

Whatever the medium of presentation might be, the significance of any autonomous work rests primarily on its internal, cognitive “truth content,” or the degree to which it brings forth and

² Adorno has written extensively on this topic and, although Cubism is held in particularly high esteem in his writings, he does attest to other forms of autonomous visual, narrative, and musical art. In The Philosophy of Modern Music he demarcates between authentic and inauthentic Modern music, with the former successfully exposing societal contradictions and the latter, conversely, distracting attention away from them. Here the exemplars are Arnold Schoenberg’s atonal compositions (contrasted with those of Igor Stravinsky) which allegedly reach the pinnacle of authenticity by dispensing with the false necessity of traditional frameworks of tonality (Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster, translators, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003).
sustains a dynamic dialectic between content and form that is projected into the world. Paradoxically resistant to and yet still inseparable from the social forces of a particular historical milieu, the dialectic truth in art stands in contrast to the falsities and contradictions concealed within the dominant norms and systemic structures of society, making their inconsistencies and disparities all too apparent and, therefore, more difficult to disregard.

Interpretation of this sort is not a matter of arriving at a single, correct interpretation but rather a process of comparing multiple interpretations. Even when the artist’s intention is clearly stated and publicly known, Adorno asserts, an artwork nonetheless retains unintended statements to consider as well. Consequently, the interpretive work of the individual is neither strictly hermeneutic nor entirely empirical. That is, in serving as a heuristic device for further reflection, the work of art always maintains a mediate position, establishing the conditions that make it possible to assume a critical stance.

As such, Adorno’s interpretive project has a negative objective whereby art is not an affirmation of necessity but of future potentiality. Therein resides its utility for the exposure or recovery of lost or ignored societal dynamics as well as for suggesting how things could potentially be otherwise. This robust sense of the term “critical” thus refers to a combination of traditional aesthetic sensibilities with a negative dialectic. Moreover, given the ongoing reflection on the social facticity of the artwork, and the specific charge of revealing hidden or overlooked forms of systemic oppression, this type of critical methodology has an inherently ethical component.

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3 The basic idea here is to uncover what the artist/author says in virtue of what he or she did not say or left out. For examples of this as well as the consideration of multiple interpretations see Adorno’s *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, Robert Hullot-Kentor, translator. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
d. Challenges Posed to Critical Reflection

“Critical,” as it is to be understood in this argument, has thus far been defined as a method of immanent critique with ethical implications. Despite its usefulness, however, even for Adorno there are limitations to its application in the face of challenges posed to autonomous art. For in addition to his concept of autonomous art as a socially monadic potentiality that is resistant to ontological classification, Adorno also reasserts the conviction, stemming from much earlier in his career and in collaborative efforts with Max Horkheimer, that all art since the advent of the modern era has become increasingly subject to the imposition of ontological structures. Adorno’s treatment of this tension is not only integral to his aesthetic writings but also to underscoring his claim that if a dialectic critique is going to be successful at exposing the hidden structures of oppression, then society must be understood, not as a rational unity, but as a dialectically constituted body. It is important to recognize, then, how Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the Enlightenment established the foundation of this method as a way to better comprehend the object of critique through, but also beyond, individual artworks.

In The Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer characterize enlightenment thinking as a conceptual framework of affirmation and standardization that is said to begin, on a very basic and simplified level, as an impulse to gain knowledge of the natural world in order to take command over it. Rooted in an instinct for survival and in response to fear in the face of the unknown, it develops as both an actual process and as a formalized system of thought that is closely associated with the scientific method. Achieving the status of an archetypical model of reason and rationality, enlightenment thought becomes emblematic of the onset of modernity and the supremacy of science over myth.
However, Adorno is concerned that the structure of enlightenment thought is often viewed, erroneously, as an inherently progressive, demythologizing instrument of reason, regardless of how or when it is applied (DE, pp.72-73). One of Adorno’s central claims is that enlightenment thought appears to break down when the same positivistic, empirical methods that yield practical advantages in certain circumstances are uncritically applied elsewhere. As a conceptual framework that strives for objectivity, adhering to empirical principles while maintaining that the universe is fundamentally rational, the efficacy of enlightenment thought is in its systematic uniformity. It classifies and divides according to discipline and then regulates inquiry and experimentation according to organized methodologies. Yet Adorno asserts that the “division of labor” model, which declares what is or is not science or approachable by scientific methods, is not as straightforward as it might appear (DE, p.13). If these divisions are assumed to be strict, concrete and unchangeable realities, then truth is eroded rather than bolstered by the process that employs them. In this vein, Adorno’s caveat is to beware of adopting a worldview that is uncritically taken as the benchmark of truth, effectively measuring progress by one ruler, because it runs the risk of becoming self-affirming and non-critical.

Adorno is not, by any means, suggesting that there has been a complete or steady societal decline, and he is not hoping to hearken back to an earlier time when things were somehow better. What he is suggesting is that when enlightenment thought is not only credited with bringing about progress in certain respects, but in many ways begins to be perceived as virtually indistinguishable from progress itself, a great deal is covered over and forgotten. When a

4 Taking my cue from Rebecca Comay (See “Adorno's Siren Song,” New German Critique, No. 81, Autumn, 2000, pp. 21-48), I will avoid the overly “cumbersome” references to Horkheimer and Adorno and refer solely to Adorno in most cases unless the specific context warrants otherwise.
method ceases to be critical, its internal biases are ignored and replicated without reflection. Not only does this foreclose any real possibility for change, it also encourages, perhaps even compels, an unmitigated quest of progress sought for the sake of progress, without any means to thoroughly question or evaluate what progress really is or might mean, and for whom. In short, it lacks a critical element.

It should also be made clear that art is not exempt from the ontologizing forces of standardization found in commodification. As a controllable prospect for profit, art becomes increasingly linked with instrumental purposiveness and economic utility. With the establishment of the art market, artworks are, among other things, organized according to their lineage or school, assigned monetary values, divided among collections held in differing levels of social esteem, and periodically appraised as investments. Functioning as commodities within an exchange apparatus, art no longer stands entirely outside of social forces as something to be valued for its purposelessness or lack of instrumental practicality. Autonomous works of art are rare, and Adorno himself raises the question of whether or not they are still possible to achieve. The difficult dilemma facing art in relation to contemporary society, Adorno contends, is how to carve out a position for art that resists being co-opted by socioeconomic forces yet also does not retreat into an obscure and irrelevant niche (AA, p.254). Even if theoretically possible, the troubling reality indicated by this dilemma, he adds, is that it, “reflects the larger phenomenon of a social totality capable of ingesting all that comes its way” (AA, p.254). Usurped by what he and Horkheimer describe as a mechanistic “culture industry,” art becomes little more than a fetishized commodity, reified second nature, just another product designed for consumption.

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5 It is described in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* as, “Purposefulness without a (practical) purpose” (AT, p.201).
Moreover, Adorno warns that a dangerous passivity arises in society whenever totalizing structures attempt to present art as universal for the masses in this way. There is a high price to pay for art’s commodification; namely, it is part and parcel of the demise of critical reflection more generally and what is ultimately described, following Herbert Marcuse, as a loss of human creativity, subjectivity, and freedom. Those who control the culture industry control the culture by deciding what is affirmed or propagated and what is systematically forgotten or repressed in society.

As culture becomes mass-produced culture for a disindividualized audience, individuals can be lulled into complacency by the entertaining distractions disseminated by the culture industry. Autonomous art is like the proverbial canary in the coal mine whose passing is the harbinger of danger and its silencing or disappearance indicates that something has gone seriously wrong.

Although Marcuse and Adorno concur that the task of confronting but not succumbing to the ever-encroaching demands for systematic categorization and commoditization becomes increasingly arduous, Adorno alone holds that autonomous works are still possible. Indeed, they are vital to Adorno’s move away from irreversible pessimism (a charge which is frequently leveled against him) and toward opening up a moment of utopian promise in his work. Yet this

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On this view of commodification, as manufactured or “false” needs gradually become indiscernible from and appear to supersede “true” needs, a distinction initially outlined by Marcuse, society follows suit by toiling to meet false needs. Individuals, perennially seeking satisfaction but caught up in a system that unreflectively assumes its own worth, unwittingly serve to perpetuate a process whereby needless production leads to endless dissatisfaction. Meanwhile, any subjectivity that might suggest other possibilities is drowned within the ubiquity of this overarching ideology. See Marcuse, Herbert, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. London: Routledge, 2002.
utopian prospect is not to be considered as an ideal to be reached or created but rather as a continual negation of structural forms of oppression through an aporetic dialectic that resists the urge to totalize.

It is worth mentioning that perhaps some might be suspicious of this emphasis on fine art, particularly if it is understood as if art is being held up as a catalyst for swift and grand change in mass society. It is important to keep in mind, however, that what is being proposed here regarding art’s liberating potential is more modest and, I believe, realistic. In employing Adorno’s aesthetics, I am making what I contend is a more tenable assertion; namely, that this kind of critique can serve as a powerful tool for examining societal structures, such as widespread commodification, and that the philosophical consideration of art can be included as an integral part of a critical method that could yield ethically relevant insights. As Paolo A. Bolaños states:

Art itself is ambivalent. While, on the one hand, art has always been vulnerable to the exploitation of the culture industry, on the other hand, Adorno still thinks that art plays a very important role in the prognosis of the “dysfunctional” nature of a purely functional world (Bolaños, 2007, p.29).

Art, and particularly avant-garde or dissonant art, stands as a non-conforming creative force in contrast with a highly conformist society, one that is made more conformist due to the standardizing efforts of commodification. It is linked to ethics via its creative expression and truth-content, not as to whether or not it excites the passions or leads one away from more pressing concerns. There is a strong connection between engaging creative expression and sustaining subjectivity, which are oppositional to conformity and the eradication of the individual subject. The ethical is viewed as that which fosters subjectivity and, by extension,
freedom. The unethical is that which squelches subjectivity and promotes unjust domination of the subject. Thus, autonomous art is linked to the ethical in that it demands a critical engagement that is otherwise extinguished by the soporific effects of the culture industry.

In this manner, Adorno’s aesthetic theory is very much at the heart of his overall philosophical project of working against oppressive ideologies. Art represents one vehicle through which ideologies can be approached, and the overall goal of aesthetic critique is to recognize and potentially change the trajectories of oppressive structures. This is to be accomplished by the recovery of the non-identical, or that which is not completely captured by domination, whether physically or conceptually, in a world that is seemingly infatuated with identity and categorization. Ultimately, then, to contend that a theory has a critical element in this sense means that it exhibits ethical relevancy via an ability to point toward avenues of liberation from unjust domination.

(iii) Characterizing Coercion and Seduction

Adorno’s critique of commodification is based in conceptual forms of domination that exhibit unjust, coercive properties. The development of his notion of critique opens up a route through which the problem of differentiating between coercion and seduction in commodification can be re-examined.

a. A Brief Overview of Ethical Views on Coercion and Seduction

Coercion, whether through physical force or mental intimidation, can be defined as a mode of asymmetrical domination that is generally held to be characteristic of injustice and oppression. Arguments can certainly be made for the ethical justification of coercion in certain
circumstances. For example, it might be deemed permissible, perhaps even obligatory, for one person to coercively compel another to involuntary leave a building that she knows to be on fire. Other forms of coercion have been justified according to the legitimized sovereignty of a governmental body. Yet for the most part, the threat of violence, loss of individual liberty, and other disempowering inequities involved in coercive practices typically put acts of coercion into a league that is outside of ethical desirability.

Seduction, at least in the modern usage of the term, refers primarily to actions that are directly influenced through enticement. Yet the ethical status of seductive behaviors is far from clear and, as even a cursory genealogical gloss makes evident, societal views on seduction have varied widely. The Greek root of “seduction” is traceable to that of the psychagoge, a type of necromancer who was believed to have the power to conjure up and lead the spirits of the dead. Ancient tragedians occasionally employed these characters in Attic drama and, Ruth Bardel contends, works such as Aeschylus’s Psychagogoi suggest an early link between the arts of rhetoric and drama and their perceived ability to entice as well as “beguile” the minds of audience members (Bardel, 2000, p.154). Not surprisingly, this fits well into grounding an explanation of the passages in Plato’s Republic, which perhaps come to mind as representing some of the first and most infamous philosophical references to seduction. Although the many nuances of this work are too complex to address here, it is nonetheless possible to summarize that in the Republic, through the character of Socrates’s derisive remarks on poeisis (“making” or “creating”) readers are presented with the possibility that: a) poeisis, whether understood as the poetry of oration in particular and/or mimetic art in general, is seductive in nature in that it has

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7 The etymological origin of psychagogue comes from the Greek “psuche,” referring to soul or mind, and “gogue” for leader or “to lead.”
the ability to hold sway over both the mind/soul (psuche) as well as the physical body, b) that this seductive quality involves a persuasiveness that runs counter to rationality, and c) because of this irrationality, it is deemed to go against the interests of the rational, harmoniously balanced individual and is also diametrically opposed to achieving a harmonious, just society, and thus, d) it is a source of corruption to be averted (Plato, 1997).

On a Nietzschean interpretation, however, it might be argued to the contrary that, even if all of these Dionysian qualities which the character Socrates appears to ascribe to seduction are accepted as given, there is still no need to accept the conclusion that they should be avoided at all costs. According to this reading, it might very well be purported that the Dionysian aspects of seduction are ultimately inseparable from the Apollinian ideal of rationality, in which case, the disindividualizing aspect of seduction, the powerless loss of self, is precisely the locus of its value (Nietzsche, 1967). This, he laments, vanishes in the progression of time and philosophical thought from Plato onward.

If perhaps it seems odd that Nietzsche, known for extolling the death of the Judeo-Christian God, would appear to mourn the passing of the Greek gods, what this represents to him is the severing of ecstatic chaos from human experience. For Nietzsche, poetic thinking or myth-making is central to the possibility that the grounding suppositions of self-hood can be transcended. That is, self-transcendence is only made available via seduction and mytho-poetic invention. A loss that is allegedly made evident by the turn of dramatic forms away from the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles to the decidedly more mundane style of Euripides, Nietzsche deems Plato’s renunciation of art to be the beginning of the end for seduction as a creative force, only to be replaced by moralizing and what he views as a decadent Modernism that perennially privileges scientism (Nietzsche, 1967).
Further genealogical tracings of seduction into the modern era, instead of settling the debate, scarcely chart a clearer development of the concept either. To some degree there is evidence of a corporeal direction whereby the beguilement or enchantment of seduction comes to be increasingly associated with sexual enticement; but again, this also appears to yield more ambiguity than exactitude. To illustrate, it is possible to recognize a Judeo-Christian thread in which acquiescence to seductive temptation in the way it is depicted allegorically in the garden of Eden, being bound to the metaphysical notions of original sin and humanity’s fall from grace, leads to the future problematization and even criminalization of seduction well into the twentieth century. Seduction was feared as a threat to a woman’s virginity, the loss of which prior to or outside of societally-sanctioned wedlock often entailed negative ramifications, not only for the bride but for all the family members who held social and financial stakes in the traditional marriage contract. Modern era criminal seduction laws offered recourse to the injured party, usually identified as a woman who had been seduced by a promise of marriage that was not forthcoming, in order to seek recompense for damages suffered. As B.L. Donovan elaborates, this was a bit of a doubled edged sword for women since, “seduction laws provided legal tools for disadvantaged women, while simultaneously requiring women to capitulate to Victorian gender norms” (Donovan, 2003, p.2). Effectively then, these laws depended upon a model of seduction that viewed it as being inherently coercive in nature, while also being problematic in themselves.

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Nonetheless, it is also possible to recognize a counter-narrative of seduction. In this account the romanticization of seduction is as broad and varied in range and scope so as to encompass everything from the medieval practice of courtly love to modern Hollywood motion pictures where, time after time, the audience is presented with characters who, purportedly against their better judgment, surrender to the temptation of desire and blissfully fall into the arms of their seducers. As the curtain falls, the lovers either live happily ever after in accordance with the Hollywood cliché or, if there is a price to be paid, then it is generally implied to have been worth it. Audiences’ perpetual willingness to both attend and applaud such spectacles indicates some level of approval and endorsement of the content. In these stories the power of seduction, the attempt to entice another into acting in a certain manner by employing charm or other modes of allure, scarcely seems coercive in the way in which ethicists commonly describe the characteristics of coercive practices. Then again, even if such counter-narratives provide alternative trajectories to the negative connotations that are so often associated with seduction, it is still fair to say that the satisfaction of such desires, either directly or indirectly in the minds of an audience, may not necessarily be the most reliable indicator of ethicality. Ethics on the whole may not, it seems, have progressed very far from dealing with Plato’s early caveat against art and seduction. So it must still be asked, what is it about seduction that so often makes it appear to be coercive? I shall address this next.

b. Why Seduction Appears to Have Coercive Properties Yet Remains Distinct

On one hand, seduction frequently involves some degree of misrepresentation that relies upon an element of illusion, exaggeration, or deceptive charm that, although initially captivating, cannot be sustained in the long-run and so ultimately fails to live up to the image it projects. So in these instances it seems as though the seducer is a purposive and manipulative figure from the
outset. Moreover, as with coercion, seduction frequently depends upon an asymmetrical power differential. Although specific situations vary, in some form or other the seducer often has the upper hand over the one being seduced. This might seem to imply that the ethical responsibility for what transpires rests mainly, if not entirely, with the seducer. Indeed, it is precisely this asymmetry that underlies ethical provisos against abuses of power in cases involving relationships between minors and adults, certain professional relationships, or other contexts in which a disparity in power or authority results in an assumed diminished capacity on the part of the target of seduction to fully and freely consent on equal ground. In such cases, the predatory manner with which the abuser undertakes the effort to “seduce” can arguably be viewed as a clear-cut form of coercion.

On the other hand, it might be argued that inherent power differentials notwithstanding, not all instances of seduction should be categorized as abusive. Seduction depends upon enticement rather than overt force, or even overt mental or emotional intimidation. For this reason, at least insofar as consenting adults are concerned, there seems to be an obvious difference in voluntary participation between acting under duress or the imminent threat of harm – the proverbial “forced at gunpoint” example of coercion – and responding to enticement through the promise of rewards involving sex, money, power, or the satisfaction of other desires. Admittedly, the latter prong of this distinction does run the risk of encountering a type of Sorites paradox in regard to the difficulty in deciding exactly where the line is crossed between incentive and abuse. Even so, it still calls into question whether or not there can be a level of willing participation on the part of the seducee that either diminishes the seducer’s responsibility for what transpires or possibly even exonerates the seducer from any charges of wrongdoing altogether. Indeed, even if it is the case that seduction implicitly entails a false representation or
broken promise, in the end the seducee might nonetheless insist that no harm was done or quite possibly even attest to being better off for having been seduced. So it seems that, once again, a conclusion about the nature of seduction and its relationship to coercion is not readily available. What renders seduction distinct from coercion is the directional movement involved in each practice. Traditional accounts of coercion tend to present it as inherently confrontational: one is dominated, subjugated, or thrust into action by force or threat. Coercion limits freedom and as previously mentioned, although some forms of coercion are reasoned to be authorized or acceptable for maintaining societal order and norms, others are considered as unjustified violations of autonomy that frequently also entail diminished expectations of personal responsibility on behalf of those coerced. These latter, more narrowly defined forms of coercion viewed as practices that directly impinge upon autonomous agency can potentially be judged as either inherently wrong as a violation of rights in principle or consequentially wrong according to the harm or negative effects that obtain as a result of violence, threat, or duress. Hence, even though philosophical viewpoints vary on the topic, more often than not there is a strong moral presumption against coercion.

Unlike coercion, seduction is not typically characterized by force, duress, or pushing otherwise autonomous agents toward a course action. Since seduction specifically involves enticement, one is instead lured into action as if being drawn to an object of desire and is, effectively, pulled towards it. This creates a perception of increased voluntarism, an appearance of complicity, the upshot of which is the much weaker presumption that seduction is possibly morally suspect but by no means as obviously problematic as is traditionally found in cases of

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9 Being “thrust into action” by coercive methods can also refer to being “thrust” or compelled by force or intimidation toward inaction, i.e. being forced to refrain from an action.
coercion. I will explore this presumption later in greater detail. For now, however, it should be sufficient to note that the “enticement factor” plays such a significant role in defining seduction that, if nothing else, it creates room to distinguish seduction from those narrowly-defined forms of coercion.

Of course, as the scope of consideration for what counts as a coercive or seductive practice is widened, the waters quickly become murky once again. Nonetheless, what I have aimed to show thus far is that the ethical uncertainty surrounding seduction arises not from the directional distinction outlined here, but because although it is reasonable to assert that seduction is not necessarily a form of coercion, seduction may still exhibit coercive properties which raise similar ethical concerns. In other words, it is still possible to distinguish between seduction and coercion in a narrow, procedural sense, even if it is more difficult to determine whether or not seduction is unequivocally distinct from coercion in a broader, ethical sense. Hence, it is my contention that the relationship between seduction and coercion should be considered as procedurally distinct, but ethically ambiguous.

If the relationship between seduction and coercion should be considered as procedurally distinct, but ethically ambiguous, the next question is: what are ethicists to make of this ambiguity? It appears to call into question, not only certain characterizations of seduction, but also the weight and attention given to coercion as an inhibitor of individual freedom and a force of unjust domination in ethical theory. This in turn raises further questions pertaining to social justice. Hence, I maintain that it is important to readdress the role that seductive as well as coercive practices play in constructing hurdles that stand in the way of freedom so that they may be understood in ways which better reflect the realities of oppressive systems in contemporary
life. Moreover, I wish to concentrate specifically on the pervasiveness of commodification in society and how employing Adorno’s notion of critique can bring these structures to light.

(iv) Bringing Critique to Bear on the Ethical in Commodification

a. Adorno’s Characterization of Commodification as a Coercive Force

Adorno’s view of widespread commodification can be typified as coercive insofar as it exceeds the parameters of practical functionality for consumable product markets. That is to say, as commodification became increasingly accepted as an ontologizing mechanism, systematically classifying and organizing goods and services as commodities for exchange, this in turn dramatically expanded the scope of what came to be viewed as definable in economic terms. According to Adorno, this created a society in which exchange value is ubiquitously prioritized above all else. Drawing on George Lukács’s theory of reification, which asserts that rampant hypostatization occurs when bourgeois society begins to accept abstract conceptualizations of social interactions as concrete commodities having objective reality, Adorno’s objection is in part a materialist critique of the post-industrial mindset.10 Adorno states that just as:

Animism had endowed things with souls; industrialism makes souls into things. On its own account, even in advance of total planning, the economic apparatus endows commodities with the values which decide the behavior of people (DE, p.21).

Due to a societal shift toward adopting a conceptual framework that mimics a production model of labor, previously unquantifiable aspects of human life are now viewed as exchangeable, capable of substitution and valuable as commodities. This principally Marxist notion presents

commodification as a dominant ideology that: a) loses sight of its own rationality, alienating humans from their own labor and social activities, and b) “fetishizes” or venerates in an almost magical or religious sense that which is now valued according to its perceived exchange value rather than for its use-value, or what it actually accomplishes in meeting human needs. Yet for Adorno, as it is also directly related to his application of critique with an ethical bite via his concept of the non-identical as that which remains in excess of the forces of reduction or commodification.

The non-identical is Adorno’s key response to escaping the trappings of ideology in order to bring about legitimate change. Moving beyond his initial point on the dangers of reification, Adorno’s broader aim is to expose the ever-present limitations of the concept of identity that lies within it. Chiefly, Adorno warns that positivistic “identity thinking” involves a process of systematic categorization which creates an unavoidable distance between the dominator and the dominated. Despite its practical advantages, he asserts, it should be kept in mind that, “Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted (DE, p.6).” As a conceptual framework which objectifies that which it means to use to meet its purposes, subjectivity is systematically devalued and removed.

That is, Adorno asserts that commodification depends upon a process of methodical categorization that, by sublimating the particular beneath general concepts, amounts to a logic of domination. He acknowledges that the practical reality of self-preservation is such that to a certain extent, however meager, an inclination toward identity thinking is an inescapable aspect

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of the human condition. It should also be noted that he is not claiming that it is in no way beneficial, that logical rigor is intrinsically bad, or that people should revert to believing in myths, following dogma, or seeking out otherworldly metaphysical mysteries as alternatives.

Moreover, an objection might also be raised that “identity thinking” is hardly tyrannical in nature, and instead gives rise to an unprecedented respect for the individual, a high regard for democracy and inalienable rights, and contributed to the development of a Utilitarian ethics dedicated to the avoidance or alleviation of suffering and the preservation of personal liberty. My response is to state that in critiquing narratives of social progress it is unwise, and indeed usually incorrect, to summarily throw the baby out with the bath water as though no progress had been made whatsoever. Consequently, I concede that there may be some merit to this objection that must be held in check while moving forward with Adorno, and in relation to his early writings in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* in particular. Yet even in that work I think a more accurate reading of Adorno is not that he abruptly condemns the whole of the Enlightenment so much as he is concerned with how seemingly positive Enlightenment values can and have been co-opted by forces that work against them and, as I stated earlier, how this can ultimately result in diminished liberty and a loss of subjectivity. More specifically, he claims that Enlightenment ideals are frequently abstracted and reified by social practices that are coercive, thus foreclosing on individual differences and rendering them incorporable into a liberating social practice. By asserting that this type of “identity thinking” can be problematic, he means that its relentless affirmation creates a lacuna between concept and object without providing a means to recover or reconcile with that which is inevitably lost. Insofar as a concept or categorization “does justice to something,” as the idiom goes, there is also a potential for injustice occurring in that same moment. Adorno is concerned that the structure of enlightenment thought is often viewed,
erroneously, as an inherently progressive, demythologizing instrument of reason, regardless of how or when it is applied (DE, pp.72-73).

For example, one of Adorno’s central claims is that Enlightenment thought appears to break down when the same positivistic, empirical methods that yield practical advantages in certain circumstances are uncritically applied elsewhere. As a conceptual framework that strives for objectivity, adhering to empirical principles while maintaining that the universe is fundamentally rational, the efficacy of enlightenment thought is in its systematic uniformity. It classifies and divides according to discipline and then regulates inquiry and experimentation according to organized methodologies. Yet Adorno asserts that the “division of labor” model, which declares what is or is not science or approachable by scientific methods, is not as straightforward as it might appear. To illustrate, he states that, “With the clean separation between science and poetry the division of labor which science had helped establish was extended to language” (DE, p.13). The odd irony of the science and art dichotomy, he declares, is that each displays the characteristics of its supposed opposite; art as a positivistic, “ideological doubling” of the world and science, particularly in the mathematical abstract, as exhibiting game-like qualities and the symbolic signifiers of the aesthetic (DE, p.13). If these divisions are assumed to be strict, concrete and unchangeable realities, then truth is eroded rather than bolstered by the process that employs them.

That is, Adorno refers to the notion of identity in the sense whereby it is employed as a universal or general category that attempts to unite particular objects or phenomena according to degrees of sameness. This categorization, by virtue of being classifiable or affirmable in some respect, appears to pass judgment on what is or is not ontologically “real” or epistemically “true.” In doing so, however, it disregards a crucial distance. The concept can never be identical
to its object; in its categorical abstraction it cannot fully subsume every aspect of that which it claims to grasp *in toto*. As such, identity thinking may either involve the misplaced status of reification or the false denial of that which it fails to recognize or acknowledge. By asserting that there is always a non-identical in tension with the identical, Adorno posits that the former error is always already predicated by the latter error in that, prior to privileging any given discourse of reification, the inaccuracy of identity thinking is ensured by the failure to admit its own limitations.

Furthermore, Adorno’s non-identical refers to the robust, critical process of revealing the contradictions that point to falseness or misrepresentations in society. This process is not simply a matter of disclosure, but is also about giving the overlooked, purposely sublimated, or systematically forgotten “non-identical” the due justice it has been denied. Overall, Adorno’s objection to the identification and reification of commodification is not just that this logic privileges the universal at the expense of the particular, seemingly if not actually obliterating subjectivity in the process, but that this distanced domination becomes the primary standard bearer for conferring value in society. For although Enlightenment thinking holds out the promise of mastery through reason, which is supposedly substantiated by the predictive powers of homogeneity and repetition, a world without widespread, fear-driven irrationality or subscription to fascist ideology has failed to materialize. To the contrary, Adorno states that insofar as myth itself is an early attempt toward enlightenment, Enlightenment thought has remained entwined with the myths it sought to eliminate:

The doctrine that action equals reaction continued to maintain the power of repetition over existence long after humankind had shed the illusion that, by repetition, it could identify itself with repeated existence and so escape its power. But the more the illusion
of magic vanishes, the more implacably repetition, in the guise of regularity, imprisons human beings in the cycle now objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects (DE, p.8).

In its attempts to explain and conquer all of nature in a very specific way, this logic of domination has repeatedly turned back on itself and into forms of ideology, ultimately amounting to a reversal of instrumental reason that affords humans less control over certain aspects of their existence. In sum, it becomes just the opposite of what it promises. A theory lacking a critical element will thus similarly be limited by its own self-referencing and potentially self-reversing structure in regard to matters of human freedom.

b. What Freedom Means in a Commodified Society

Adorno’s use of critique and the continual process of critical reflection on the societal tensions it brings forward is not only integral to his aesthetic writings but also to underscoring the claim that addressing the difference between commodification as a coercive practice and commodification as a seductive practice is important to recognizing the mechanisms by which the systematic constitution or exclusion of embodied individuals can lead to dangerous ideologies that profess to provide greater freedom for human life while simultaneously fostering injustice in practice. That is, Adorno’s consideration of societal contradictions has far reaching implications that extend well beyond the realm of art and directly address underlying issues which remain driving concerns throughout his thought: the factors that encourage domination or facilitate a persistent resistance to change and how these bear on human suffering and the possibility of freedom. Yet what does freedom even mean in a highly commodified society? How can a theory that was initially formulated around art still retain its critical efficacy in regard to questions of human freedom?
Evoking both science and storefront, Cornell’s *Untitled (Butterfly Habitat)* perplexes the boundaries between body and commodity, and so presents an opportunity to illustrate critical reflection upon the interplay of dominance and vulnerability that sustains this tension within the space.

In an extended consideration of Cornell’s art in comparison to the poetry of Marianne Moore, Jennie-Rebecca Falcetta describes two disparate responses to Cornell’s use of found objects within his boxed constructions (Falcetta, 2006). First, Falcetta discusses an interview with poet and literary critic Donald Revell. Revell initially applauds both Moore and Cornell for having a mutual mindset quite similar to the playful inventiveness of the trouvère poets (Falcetta, 2006, p.124). However, on Revell’s view, both artists also share a troubling proclivity, whether expressed through the calculable syllables of a poem or the enclosed space of a box construction, to subsequently compromise this aesthetic openness through an irrepressible urge to contain (Falcetta, 2006, p.124). As Falcetta relates, Revell’s statements on Moore and Cornell, “suggest that their common practice of containment undercuts the spontaneous ‘found’ quality of their work and stems from a misguided impulse to exert a rigid control over their material” (Falcetta, 2006, p.124). In claiming that the novel air of chance and spontaneity associated with the re-discovery of found artifacts is blighted by the act of enclosure within boxes or under glass, Revell’s response to Cornell’s work implies a failing or loss.

Alternately, although Susan Stewart’s view is in accord with the observation that Cornell’s assemblages display an impetus for control and containment, Stewart considers this aspect of Cornell’s work to be a strength rather than a shortcoming. Stewart praises Cornell precisely for his ability to select, arrange, and contain found objects within a sort of hermetically-sealed world, each of which is singularly complete (Stewart, 1992, p.152).
These competing assessments of the allusions to life within Cornell’s Habitat series speak to an important tension within his work: the possibility of freedom and to the foreclosure of this possibility.

Falcetta, who leans toward supporting Stewart’s assessment, judges Revell’s view to be a largely superficial, if not altogether uncommon, estimation of Cornell’s work. Yet she also finds evidence for freedom amongst the containment. In an interpretation that is somewhat reminiscent of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, Falcetta asserts that the Habitat series can be viewed as Cornell working out his own metaphorical struggles. In apparent validation of the Enlightenment impulse to master nature, Falcetta likens Cornell’s dioramas to the creation of a personalized, museum-in-miniature where what is actually contained within the bottles and boxes matters less than, “the fact that their contents have been deemed worthy of preservation and enclosure” (Falcetta, 2006, p.125). In discussing the different Habitat constructions, Falcetta singles out Untitled (Butterfly Habitat) as one work in which the title “Habitat” is “misleading” because “the insects here are clearly pinned down” (Falcetta, 2006, p.141). She then contrasts this work against the more lively Untitled (Parrot and Butterfly Habitat) which, she claims, “recreates the natural environment” as images of insects appear to flutter about on plants while two parrots look on with what she describes as “quizzical interest” (Falcetta, 2006, p.141). Following this side by side comparison, she concludes that there is not only evidence for recognizing “the animal collected” in Cornell’s works but also “the animal free” (Falcetta, 2006, p.141).

Cornell’s intentions or personal struggles aside, what is perhaps most interesting in Falcetta’s article is not that she is necessarily off-base in her poetic interpretation and thematic comparison to the work of Marianne Moore, but that in considering the different Habitat
constructions she appears to overlook internal tensions that are quite common in Cornell’s work. Regardless of what Cornell meant to convey in either work, Falcetta does not mention that even in the allegedly recreated environment of the Parrot and Butterfly Habitat a small clump of mesh, which could suggest either nesting material or netting, hangs just above and behind the heads of the parrot images while the butterfly images are noticeably segregated into a separate vertical container within the piece. At the same time as it suggests life, flight, and even freedom, it also hints at containment and control. The same can be said for Habitat Group for a Shooting Gallery with, as Falcetta describes, its “cockatoos, parrots, broken glass and spattered paint” (Falcetta, 2006, p.141). This work adds a further dimension to consider, a quality of play or chance, to its appropriation of life-like images by simulating a game, a shooting arcade, which itself simulates life and the threat of death, or the “free” animal versus its vulnerability to collection, commoditization, or even elimination in facing the tools that attempt to master nature. It is questionable, then, that the Parrot and Butterfly piece or any of the Habitat works present a recreated natural or “free” habitat that is a counter to the containment of Butterfly Habitat. Rather, they are its complements. What seems to emerge in all of these works, and perhaps quite clearly in *Untitled (Butterfly Habitat)*, is the jarring experience of juxtaposition as the viewer’s expectation of a unified resolution is challenged by the irreducibility of the work to either freedom or containment. What’s more, it raises the question: how different are human bodies from the insect and animal bodies in these so-called Habitats? Are humans the masters, controlling and containing nature, or is there a way in which humans themselves are coerced, caught, and contained beneath the pins of structural domination? Does *Untitled (Butterfly Habitat)* suggest the restraints of the “body collected” but also the possibility of the “body free?”
Two ways of considering “body” in relation to Adorno’s thought are as societal bodies and embodied individuals, both of which can be involved in the structural machinations of oppression. Out of the unquestioned domination of identity thinking, Adorno claims, a type of domination arises that is no longer just indicative of the material domination of nature, but also as the power of thought over the subjective individual and societal consciousness:

Justified in the guise of brutal facts as something eternally immune to intervention, the social injustice from which those facts arise is as sacrosanct today as the medicine man once was under the protection of his gods. 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 (DE, p.21).

Domination of this sort takes not only the form of human over environmental nature but also of the individual human over one’s self and human over other humans. It is accomplished in part through thought, by confusing and at times reversing the distinction between subject and object, until compulsory objectification and reification dominates subjectivity. Yet it is not limited to thought, as an idealist theory might be, but is instead made manifest in active practices and actualized oppression.

The material measure of domination as oppression, for Adorno, is suffering. Suffering is an “objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed” (ND pp.17-18). In the case of true progress, society and culture should be synchronous, and yet all too often they seem to be pulling apart. Social advances, or the reduction of suffering, have frequently lagged behind or even moved in adverse correlation with
the technological and other cultural advances which were supposed to lessen suffering and provide greater power to control one’s own destiny.

Freedom, by contrast, is an awareness of and resistance to these forces. People subscribe to ideology less by their own volition, Adorno contends, so much as by being constituted via saturation in a system so far-reaching and deeply dispersed that it permeates the individual. Caught in a cycle of reification where nature becomes intertwined with sociohistorical dynamics, humans come to accept culture almost as a form of nature within which they manage to maintain a small level of control and so perennially resubscribe to what appears true to them as given and to the self-limiting amount of choice that they believe to be greater than it actually is. Moreover, at times individuals and groups will go so far as to relinquish their freedom in the very name of preserving a false promise of freedom.

Freedom at its most basic form does not depend upon positive affirmation but on uncovering the non-identical, the residue between concept and object, and also, between policy and practice. As John McCormick writes, for Adorno and Horkheimer:

…the notion of a liberated subject is not a subject extracted from social solidarity as in bourgeois liberalism but one capable of actualized autonomy. Relegating autonomous practice to the replication of Descartes’ “I think” (DE, p.26) is not substantive freedom (McCormick, 2001, p.279).

Freedom is not defined strictly as a matter of autonomous choice, but as the ability to hold a speculative stance that resists the structural forces of oppression. This urge to truth leads to a freedom which is the ability to recognize contradictions and disparities and to give a “voice” to the forgotten or forcibly quieted, and in due course, to suffering.
Neither freedom nor progress in the richest sense is achieved by reinforcing structural forces of domination. Even if these structures facilitate some modicum of practical use deemed good, administered society can still neglect to notice or purposely downplay the impact of the contradictory, and at times seemingly ironic, ways in which they also lead to reversals of both their promise and instrumental reason. Transforming these structures is not an easy process by any means, but Adorno asserts that leaving these structures in place only reinforces systematic oppression and forecloses the possibility of change. By contrast, the way to approach their undoing is negatively, through critique as it has been articulated here.

(v) Conclusion: Critique, Art, Adorno, and Freedom

The aim of this chapter has been to elucidate what it means for a theory to contain a critical element in the robust sense of the term developed by Adorno as well as to demonstrate how a critical theory can also function as an ethical one. I attempted to show that Adorno’s consideration of societal contradictions has far reaching implications that extend well beyond the realm of art and directly address underlying issues which remain driving concerns throughout his thought; chiefly, the factors that encourage domination or facilitate a persistent resistance to change and how these bear on human suffering and the possibility of freedom.

Since Adorno holds that the problem of liberation from oppression is a systemic one, the crux of his theory aims to make criticism central to philosophical endeavors. He claims that by adhering too closely to positivistic methods, domination is repeated in philosophy as a lack of critique and as a result, "Philosophy resigned when she elevated to her own status the science which she alone was intended to illumine" (WP, p.46). Theories that lack a critical element cannot help but reflect their own ideology. Non-identical thinking, by contrast, seeks to uncover internal contradictions within the ideologies themselves.
The emancipatory potential of autonomous art resides in its ability to help to mediate the exposure of the non-identical for speculative critique. It helps raise awareness of the conceptual frameworks that are in place, thus setting the stage for potential liberation. Adorno claims that what can take be gleaned from art is not merely what it aims to demonstrate overtly, but the questions that artworks’ unresolved tensions raise in regard to society. The same kind of method can be useful for philosophy. That is, the interpretive stance serves as a model approach for thinking about societal problems for, “what is right for art is applicable to philosophy, which contains an essence of truth in line with that expressed in art, although its methods are dissimilar” (WP, p.50). Although it is not sufficient to bring about legitimate change in itself, critical reflection on the tensions sustained in art can initiate a dialectic movement that at least suggests the possibility of transformation.

Adorno’s critical theory calls for transformation, but this should not be misconstrued as equivalent to Marxist calls for revolution. Certainly, it emerges from this materialist lineage and maintains several impulses of that tradition, but Adorno means to distance himself from what he views as Marxism’s over-reliance on relations of production and class struggle in approaching human life. Nor should the possibility for a positive step toward progress be taken as a move towards a definitive synthesis or resolution. Even in Hegelian dialectics, it is a myth that the question has been answered completely in the synthesis that emerges. This is all the more true for Adorno, who posits that instead of seeking linear progress, the goal of critical theory is the conviction that through continuous dialectic, the categories of domination might disappear as people are made aware of them. Moreover, even if it cannot undo past injustices, the non-identical can perhaps help to stave off future ones. It also suggests the continual need to rethink the ways in which injustices are committed and the various forms they might take.
Later philosophers, particularly in areas of social philosophy, feminism, and post-colonial theory have acknowledged Adorno’s influence on critical approaches to society and culture. Jean Baudrillard, to name one in particular, makes significant use of Adorno’s theory on the reversal of instrumental reason in his own theory of hyperrealism. However, post-modern and post-structuralist thinkers have not always embraced his emphasis on conceptual frameworks and the need to return some facet of individual subjectivity to philosophy, even if Adorno rejects retreating into subjectivity entirely. For example, although Adorno’s approach to concepts and objects may bear some initial resemblance to Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction, it ultimately remains quite distinct from Derrida’s supplement of meaning and reflection. Additionally, genealogical criticism and critical theory run parallel in many respects, and yet thinkers such as Foucault tend to move in different directions at times, such as by focusing on disciplinary structures and dimensions of power more closely affiliated with Friedrich Nietzsche than Adorno. Yet while Adorno’s theory remains distinct from many of its later sympathizers, it never claims that the structural categories it brings into consideration are either an historical necessity or permanently fixed. To the contrary, because they can be changed is precisely the reason why criticism is necessary.

In this chapter I have intended to show that traditional accounts of coercion have been inclined to present it as inherently confrontational; one is dominated, subjugated, or thrust into action by threat rather than choice. Despite the two potential caveats that I raised and responded to earlier, that Adorno’s theory may overstate the efficacy of art and that it is perhaps hastily dismissive of Enlightenment thought and values, I maintain that Adorno still provides a radically new way of thinking about freedom and domination that provides a useful framework for reconsidering societal structures and working against oppression. After tracing the conceptual
roots and practical significance of the non-identical in Adorno’s thought, however, I wish to suggest that there is also a weakness in that this framework seems to be heavily tied to a model of commodification as a coercive practice. What is troubling about this close association with identity thinking and commodification is that as a coercive force it does not address what I have contended is a similar, but distinct mechanism that can also be found in commodification. Simply put, Adorno’s theory is useful for locating unjust domination and oppression when it follows a typically coercive trajectory, but it does not adequately account for commodification as a seductive practice. This renders it deficient in its ability to address the moral ambiguities and other implications of seduction.

In the chapter that follows I will address this weakness as well as argue that ethicists must recognize that a fundamental paradigm shift has taken place between these two types of commodification. If the systemic structures of oppression are to be addressed more effectively than they have in the past, then ethicists must specifically attend to instances and effects of commodification as a seductive practice.

“Those Lichtenstein works seduce us because they invite us to reconstruct stories with only marginal clues and starting with the inevitable questions: Who is Brad? What does the icy ‘hello’ mean? Will the torpedo he is about to launch hit the target?”

-- Juan Antonio Ramirez, 2007, p.22.
CHAPTER 2: RECONSIDERING THE SIRENS:  
THE SHIFT FROM COERCION TO SEDUCTION  

(i) Introduction

The first chapter clarified how the term critical is to be understood within this dissertation as well as the structural differences between coercion and seduction. These concepts were then placed in relation to systematic practices of domination that restrict freedom and could result in human suffering. Adorno claims that commodification is one form of these systematic practices. I contended that his aesthetic theory, which he developed in part as a response to commodification, can be utilized to bring awareness to various tensions in society that point toward unjust domination. However, despite Adorno’s fervent attention to commodification as a coercive practice, there is more work to be done with regard to commodification as a seductive practice. Consequently, the main objective of this chapter is to demonstrate that a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction has occurred in widespread commodification practices.

Through the process of establishing this paradigm shift it will be shown that, although it may be underrepresented in the work of Adorno and others, seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion. In order to address the pervasiveness of commodification in contemporary life and the impact that seductive practices can have on human embodiment and freedom, I will also endeavor to answer the following questions:

1. What ramifications might commodification as a seductive practice have for human embodiment and freedom?

2. To what degree has seduction come to rival coercion as a means of influence and control in society?
3. Even if seductive practices have become widespread, why does it matter that they receive serious ethical consideration?

For the first question, I will present evidence for the expanding role of commodification in popular culture and how the mechanisms of commodification have changed over time. This will commence with a discussion on the presence of seduction in Adorno’s thought. For the second question, I will draw upon Gilles Lipovetsky’s philosophical writings on fashion. Lipovetsky contends that fashion functions via a logic of commodification that is exemplified by seduction. His research provides support for claims to the expanded role of commodification. Since fashion can be viewed as a nexus between body and commodity that gives rise to questions of freedom, it is also particularly germane to addressing the issue of ethical responsibility. Yet despite important areas of convergence, there are also divergences between my contentions and those of Lipovetsky. To answer the third question, then, I will present a potential objection to my view. Although I will not fully respond to this objection in this chapter, I will foreground the work of the next chapter by first presenting a careful exegesis of Lipovetsky’s claims and explain why it matters whether or not widespread seduction is given serious ethical consideration. Chiefly, given the current state of commodification, without careful consideration of the practices in play vastly different implications can be drawn from privileging a certain view of freedom at the expense of those affected by seemingly benign practices that do not imitate archetypical methods of domination and control. Contrary to Lipovetsky’s conclusion, then, I argue that ethicists should be deeply concerned with the mechanisms of seduction.

In keeping with the aesthetic method previously proposed, I will once again begin by interrogating an artwork in order to bring the dialectical tensions contained within it to the forefront for further discussion. As discussed in Chapter One, Adorno contrasts “autonomous
art,” or art which is capable of raising important questions by bringing attention to tensions and contradictions, against a model of art comprised primarily from the products of a shrewdly coercive “culture industry” which instead provides mass-produced and relatively non-challenging commodities as entertainment for society. Whereas I have previously asserted that Joseph Cornell’s work exhibits formal as well as thematic qualities that seem particularly well-suited for illustrating Adorno’s concept of autonomous art, Roy Lichtenstein’s work, in its embrace of the products and milieus of popular culture, might initially seem to fall squarely into the commodified camp. Then again, by categorically disparaging certain types of visual art, music, and fiction, Adorno may have overlooked potential opportunities to employ his method more broadly. As I will soon elaborate, it can be shown that Lichtenstein’s work demonstrates both the cusp of a movement from Modernism to Post-modernism, as well as an artistic shift from the expression of underlying coercive forces to being reflective of a contemporary era largely dominated by seduction.

By approaching a piece such as Lichtenstein’s *Drowning Girl* on Adorno’s own terms, my intent is to use the work as a device which helps to illuminate more than merely the encroachment of commodification in a manner that seems overtly illustrated by Pop Art. Specifically, I aim to bolster the case that a paradigm shift has taken place between two specific types of commodification, one coercive and the other seductive, the latter of which I hold to be inadequately addressed in Adorno’s thought as well as in much of contemporary philosophical theory.

The main difficulty with Adorno’s inattention to seduction, I believe, is not simply that it leaves his work vulnerable to philosophical critiques, but that as it stands this apparent weakness hampers employing an otherwise useful critical method to expose disturbing trends pertaining to
human embodiment and freedom. This has ethical repercussions in that it renders the expository force of the non-identical rather anemic with regard to unjust domination. Consequently, any attempts by contemporary ethicists to address systemic structures of domination and oppression more effectively should specifically attend to the practices and effects of commodification as a seductive practice. Those who choose to ignore them risk not only inaccuracy, but also the freedom of those whose interests are overlooked and thus factored out of the equation from the onset.

(ii) Why Examine Pop? Art, Commodification, and the Tension between the Desire for Authenticity and the Allure of the Ephemeral

Lichtenstein gained notoriety through his association in an artistic movement which has collectively come to be labeled “Pop Art.” In many ways Pop Art would appear to be the epitome of commodification. Beginning in the 1950s, it characteristically includes the replication of mass-produced images, many of which are appropriated from advertising and brand name products, highly recognizable iconic celebrities, or similarly emblematic symbols of British or American culture.1 Although post-Duchampian and anti-elitist in its manner of bringing everyday items and images into the vocabulary of the fine art world, Pop Art nonetheless became associated with a commercially glamorous and fashionable lifestyle in its celebration of contemporary urban life, youthful beauty, and popular culture. Moreover, a new trend began to emerge when a number of its practitioners not only welcomed art dealers and the

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1 Here I am thinking of, for example, Warhol’s Soup Cans, paintings of Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, other celebrities and even the US dollar bill as well as Jasper John’s American flags, Claus Oldenburg’s oversized replicas, and James Rosenquist’s large-scale, sign-like paintings, just to name a sampling. Similar movements can also be found in other countries such as Japan, Italy, and Spain.
affluent into their studios with open arms, but also had few or no qualms about licensing their artworks for mass-reproduction on posters, T-shirts, coffee mugs, or other consumer items. Today this practice continues to be a major component in marketing many artists and their work to large audiences. The more easily recognizable and replicable an image is, the better it serves this purpose. On occasion, some Pop artists would even go so far as to publicly delight in reaping the profits of their artistic labor, thus choosing to openly reject the Modernist ideal that commercial success should never be a factor in artistic success.  

Hence, the legacy of Pop Art is one that is indelibly linked with commercialization and the consumable.

For better or worse, the emergence of Pop Art exacted a lasting change on the way a good deal of Western society began approaching art and it should not, as some of its early detractors attested, be dismissed out of hand as merely a passing fad. In addition, while much of Pop Art passed quickly into forgotten oblivion, a limited number of works are consistently held to be notable achievements in twentieth century art. Adorno, however, would likely have little but scorn for the Pop Art movement, as he certainly had plenty of ire for popular music. Even though Pop Art was viewed in its era as a “radical” departure from the artistic standards of the day, Krzysztof Ziarek remarks that Adorno:

…sounds a clear note of caution in his writings about the proliferation of this idea of novelty, and insists on making a distinction between radical art and the aesthetic of the

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2 Andy Warhol, by undertaking such acts as producing paintings of money and professing to be a “business artist” is perhaps the most obvious example of this direct subversion of Modern aesthetic values. For more on Warhol and this position see George Hagman’s The Artist's Mind: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Creativity, Modern Art, and Modern Artists. East Sussex, Great Britain and New York, NY: Routledge, 2010, pp.158-9.

new, which, instead of producing a transformation in the social, merely masks the repetition of the same (Ziarek, 2002, p.341).

To be new and different is not in and of itself sufficient to create truly transformative opportunities. Bringing about the conditions for that kind of change requires art that escapes the encroachment of the administered world and disrupts the human experience at a much deeper level (Ziarek, 2002, p.343).

This raises a number of questions: Is Pop Art just an absurd end reached via the means of the techno-financial takeover of art by an administered culture industry? Can any of these works achieve, or at least approach, some level of autonomous power? What is to be gained by reflecting on them in this way? These questions will now be addressed.

a. Pop Art is More Than a Commodity, it is Also Social Commentary

According to Adorno, form takes priority over content or context (AT, p.230). If it can be shown that the formal elements of a so-called Pop Art piece hold together in such a way that the work can be said to speak for itself without additional information pertaining to its content or the context in which it appears, then it would meet the first criterion for applying Adorno’s aesthetic guidelines. Secondly, what Adorno appears to fear most is not simply the failure of reaching formal aesthetic ideals, but the passive, non-critical consumption of art.4 Once it has been established that the piece in its entirety exhibits demonstrable properties of significant dialectic tensions, it could then be useful to delve into the informal properties as well, such as

4 Amongst the greatest offenders, for Adorno, are works that fall into the category of “kitsch.” He writes that kitsch, “or sugary trash, is the beautiful minus its ugly counterpart” (AT, p.71). Essentially, on his view, works of this sort are sanitized, over-sentimentalized caricatures of art that have mass appeal but no real social function.
considering the evocative elements that contribute to these tensions and the disruptive power of the piece. Hence, Adorno’s concerns notwithstanding, it is my contention that it is both: a) possible to effectively apply Adorno’s critical method of attempting to expose the non-identical within certain Pop Art works, such as, for example, Lichtenstein’s *Drowning Girl* as well as b) useful as a means to gaining knowledge of what the piece might have to offer in terms of critical social commentary.

It is also worth keeping in mind that Adorno’s writings preceded decades of critical commentary on Pop Art and the historical vetting of certain works that appear to be withstanding the unofficial artistic “test of time.” While there is no way to speculate in hindsight if or how Adorno’s views might have changed on this account, his basic principles can still be applied to works he did not directly address. This would seem especially relevant in regard to movements that represent major changes in aesthetic or social values. Instead of a hasty rejection of all Pop Art as mere products of the culture industry, then, further consideration is warranted.

b. *The Seduction of Consumption: What Lichtenstein Reveals About Commodification as a Seductive Practice*

In many respects, Roy Lichtenstein’s *Drowning Girl* is exemplary of the artist’s signature style, which includes the frequent appropriation and reinterpretation of images found in comic strips or advertisements.\(^5\) The painting depicts a tearful young woman who is all but submerged amidst threatening waves. Above the subject’s head he employs the graphic convention of a cartoon “thought-bubble” to convey the melodramatic message, “I don’t care! I’d rather sink than ask Brad for help!” Combining the helplessness of distress with the stubborn obstinance of

\(^5\) There are, unquestionably, variations in Lichtenstein’s style, but this is largely exemplary of the earlier works for which he became (and remains) best-known.
an intractable will, this ridiculous yet somewhat believable text adds a surprising touch of wry humor to the piece. Despite the dimensional flatness of the space, seemingly a comic strip frame isolated from its narrative context, there exists in the piece an almost cinematic quality of a moment occurring in time. It also nostalgically evokes an earlier age of Hollywood glamour where the first rule of motion picture photography demanded that the heroine remain attractive at all times, regardless of whatever elemental threat she faced, be it wind, water, fire, or what have you. The work can be described as subtly seductive, not strictly in a sexual sense, but for the way it quickly catches people’s attention, pulls them into a slice of life vignette, and elicits curiosity surrounding the woman and her relationship with the pictorially absent Brad. As such, the piece appears to exhibit an inner tension between the notion of authenticity associated with a “real life” scenario and the seductive allure of an ephemeral fiction.

This ironic tension in Lichtenstein’s painting seems to directly touch upon Adorno’s concern regarding an encroachment of commodification in life as evidenced by art. Yet instead of presenting solely coercive properties, it is in fact highly suggestive of commodification as a seductive practice. What's more, not only this piece but much of Lichtenstein’s body of work raises questions about a society in which individuals claim to value authenticity, but are nonetheless drawn to more attractive, altered versions of reality. That is, Lichtenstein gained international notoriety by harnessing the mass cultural appeal of comic book images and recontextualizing them for a fine art environment. With a nod to Duchamp’s ready-made, he made no secret of his appropriation of images and that his technique frequently included projection tracing and stencils. This notwithstanding, he insisted that they were not simply copies but were in fact transformed, original works. Still, even Lichtenstein himself conceded that it was often difficult to recognize the difference (Coplans, 1972, p.55 and pp.30-31).
Over time, Lichtenstein’s work gradually gained ground in the debate over whether or not they sufficiently met the criteria for “real” art. His pieces appear in major museums as well as in distinguished exhibitions, catalogs, and private collections. All of these point toward earning the stamp of official approval by art aficionados and historians. Yet simultaneously, his images have served as the source for some of the most frequently mass-produced replicas in art history, appearing on a wide variety of posters and products, all of which sell for a fraction of what a “real” or “authentic” Lichtenstein fetches at auction. They have also spawned an untold number of imitations in style. Hence, the tension between the real and the ephemeral in Lichtenstein’s work seems to be operating on multiple levels, one between artist and audience and another within the works themselves.

Both levels seem to speak to seduction within a highly commodified consumer culture, while skillfully managing to maintain some degree of autonomy. Unlike many of Andy Warhol’s works from the same epoch, which so overtly inverted the values of Modernism by embracing fortune, fame, and the passing fads, Lichtenstein manages to keep a foot in both worlds. As Cécile Whiting has noted:

Critics in the 1960s essentially praised Lichtenstein for having achieved the modernist ideal of formalist detachment in which the controlling gaze is directed toward but never seduced by consumer culture (Whiting, 1997, p.120).

By finding source material in print advertisements and cartoon characters while isolating their thematic content in a way that is secondary to the formal elements, Lichtenstein’s work was perfectly timed in addressing the melding of consumerism and mass media, seemingly from the vantage point of a detached observer. It is seductive in its pull, but is not itself seduced into a
reduction to simple, meaningless kitsch. Moreover, as Whiting further contends, from the 1950s onward critics and thinkers:

…associated consumer culture with female consumers and concluded that its formulaic nature absorbed and pacified its audience. Thus, to distinguish Lichtenstein’s paintings from their comic book sources was implicitly to defend the masculinist definition of the cool and controlled creator against the feminine threat of absorption by consumer culture (Whiting, 1997, p.120).

That is, masculinity becomes associated with production, the task of industry and action, and is then posited as an opposite of femininity, characterized by shopping, spending, or otherwise passively consuming the fruits of productive labor.

If drawing this distinction may seem to be a bit of a stretch for some, I believe that there is evidence to support this kind of reading of Lichtenstein’s work within the context of its time. Moreover, as will be evidenced below, these thematic elements are not merely incidental to the spread of commodification as a seductive practice but are also quite telling in the cultural biases they reveal.

Despite the fact that the Second World War created employment opportunities for millions of women to enter the workforce for the first time, the vast majority of these women were subsequently displaced when male soldiers returned from military service overseas. Although the marriage bars that kept women out of many professions were finally done away with by 1950, a high percentage of American and British women were still largely income-

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6 I do not wish to give the impression that I am strictly opposing Warhol to Lichtenstein, contrasting the quality of their respective work, or suggesting that Warhol’s work lacks value or meaning. My intention here is to make note of the way in which Lichtenstein’s works function differently from Warhol’s, despite both being categorized as Pop Art and sharing certain other elements in common.
dependent upon a male provider during the 1960’s (Briar, 2004, pp.39-42). For many who were employed, the work was either part time or, even if full time, often dictated by financial necessity irrespective of their volition to have a career for personal fulfillment. However, nascent changes in widespread social norms regarding gender roles do began to appear between the early and late 1960’s. Interestingly, these changes coincide with a period of American economic prosperity and a growing consumerism of the type which Thornstein Veblen had described many decades earlier as “conspicuous consumption,” or consumption aimed primarily at achieving social status rather than for any demonstrable purpose (Veblen, 1912, p.91).

This transitional period in Western culture was critical for Lichtenstein’s development as an artist and the strength of his work appears due, at least in part, to his ability to tap directly into these still rather rigidly defined male and female stereotypes as well as the perceived link between consumption and seduction. Although Lichtenstein drew inspiration from a variety of genres in popular culture, his best known images and the works which are most commonly associated with substantiating his position as a major artist can be delineated, as Juan Antonio Ramirez categorizes them, as pieces depicting either “bellicose” or “romantic” figures (Ramirez, 2007, p.18). In both cases, those that include human figures appear to communicate cinematic, reified emotional states. According to Ramirez, there is a phallocentricity to the bellicose pieces in that they excitedly emphasize a heroic mythology of militaristic machines, guns, airplanes, and explosions that presents the viewer with, not a direct criticism of military action so much as an ironic commentary on the, “fascistic machismo in the masculine products of mass culture” (Ramirez, 2007, p.18).
These images appear, nonetheless, markedly less inert than those found in his romantic paintings which include representations of both male and female figures yet are often referred to colloquially as Lichtenstein’s “Girls” since the female figures drive much of the thematic content. That is, the romantic pieces are formally objective and seemingly impersonal in their production, while thematically they present images of romantic desire or despair.

Whereas the source material of the bellicose works is clearly rooted in a retelling of World War Two era conflict, the romantic works reveal a melodramatic consumer society that nonetheless belies, as Ramirez describes it, the “masochistic undercurrent that fed the popular subculture” of the 1950s and 1960s (Ramirez, 2007, p.18). This contrast is illustrative of moving from an era of commodification that emphasized the forces of production to an era focused chiefly on consumption, the promotion of which can readily be linked to seduction, fantasy, and the ephemeral. Subsequently, this gives rise to an edgy discomfort with the obliteration of originality that satisfying such narrow ideals would seem to demand. As Lichtenstein himself related, the female figures he painted were:
…really made up of black lines and red dots. I see it that abstractly, that it's very hard to fall for one of these creatures, to me, because they're not really reality to me. However, that doesn't mean that I don't have a clichéd ideal, a fantasy ideal, of a woman that I would be interested in. But I think I have in mind what they should look like for other people (Gagosian Gallery, 2008).

Lichtenstein’s “Girls,” in which female figures are habitually depicted as distressed yet seductively glamorous, if over-the-top, representations of femininity were so firmly reflective of the gender stereotypes within consumer culture that they later inspired a popular series of feminist parody post cards and buttons in the 1980s. Yet as John Noel Duvall contends, while transforming Lichtenstein’s use of text into more blatantly ironic statements such as, for example, changing “I’ve nothing to live for!” into “I’ve nothing to wear!” did confront gender stereotypes, they scarcely worked to undermine the consumerism of the culture industry (Duvall, 2002, p.17). To the contrary, Duvall claims, even without knowing the references to the originals, the almost indistinguishable post card images, “can confirm the identity of a variety of consumers regardless of how much or how little of the intertextual puzzle any particular viewer understands” (Duvall, 2002, p.17). Mass produced and sold to a wide audience, Duvall concludes that even in poking fun at consumer culture, “the parody seems more complicitous with than critical of the economic order” (Duvall, 2002, p.17). Critiques aside, Lichtenstein’s works may not necessarily seem shockingly original or unmistakable, but they have nonetheless withstood some degree of imitation and lampooning.

Still, and more importantly, the themes of femininity that became attached to consumerism are not tangential to reflecting on this increase in commodification practices, particularly those of a seductive nature. By reinforcing the associations of a) production,
maleness, and authenticity as dichotomous opposites to b) consumption, femaleness, and the ephemeral or inauthentic, it underscores the conceptual biases that attach to them as a) masculinized, overt acts of coercion versus b) feminized, more abstract, ambiguous, or even trifling, instances of seduction. The former implies action and authenticity, power and consequence. The latter implies, at best, willing participation in commodification and, at worst, submission to it. It is a nuanced distinction, perhaps, but is also not surprising that insofar as commodification was concerned, ethicists in a post-war society focused far more on coercion and production than they did on seduction and consumption. Yet submission is not the same as consent. The non-identical in need of recovery in this example is not merely indicative of gender norms, but also how they can play into the evaluation of certain acts and practices.

To conclude, despite all of the criticisms, caricatures, and parodies, Lichtenstein’s use of the comic style from this time period still provides examples of a lasting cultural commentary that manages to escape total appropriation. Even today, a piece like *Drowning Girl*, in which the figure is so closely cropped that it has been described as claustrophobic, leaves the viewer somewhat unsettled, seeking resolution or at least knowledge of the next stage of the story. Yet the fantasy figure stays forever frozen and unattainable, and the filmic image remains unresolved. Hence, perhaps its greatest strength is that it simultaneously exalts and exposes the clichés of femininity. In doing so, what this tension helps bring to the forefront is, firstly, deeply entrenched notions regarding seduction as a threat to freedom that are often uncritically repeated over time. Secondly, Lichtenstein (and Pop Art more generally) presents commodification as something that is expanding into new areas of life and culture on a very large scale, and operating in very seductive ways, which illustrates the need for greater reflection on the
conceptual ties between seduction and consumer cultures. In the sections that follow I will elaborate on these two claims.

(iii) Commodification as a Seductive Practice has Ramifications for Human Embodiment and Freedom

As to the first item, my contention that there are deeply entrenched notions regarding seduction as a threat to freedom that are often uncritically repeated over time, turning to literature makes it possible to trace the association of seduction and the feminine to ancient times. In early Greek mythology the Sirens were initially described in sexually ambiguous, non-gender-specific terms. They later came to be depicted more frequently as bird-women whose enchanting, irresistibly seductive singing led male sailors to watery graves.\(^7\) In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the hero Odysseus outmaneuvers the Sirens by ordering his ship’s crew to tie him to the mast so that he can hear their voices while still pressing forth toward the island that holds out the promise of their collective future. Their ears filled with beeswax, the crew labors to propel the ship onward, immune to both the Sirens’ songs and Odysseus’s pleasure-maddened pleas as they bind his body to the mast even tighter (Homer, 1879, Book XII).

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer employ the Siren story as an excursus on the intermingling of myth and rationality. On their reading, Odysseus’s pursuit of domination over nature is challenged by the allure of art, an alternative knowledge that inspires both fear and the temptation of the unknown, for:

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Even though the Sirens know all that has happened, they demand the future as the price of that knowledge, and the promise of the happy return is the deception with which the past ensnares the one who longs for it (DE, p.48).

Yet once tied to the mast Odysseus is grounded in a familiar, compartmentalized understanding of reality while simultaneously, and somewhat fatalistically, turning himself over to the possibility of unmasking all of the deceptions that have so far gone undetected in his understanding of nature and his perceived power over it (DE, p.40 & p.42). In so doing, Adorno and Horkheimer contend, “The formula for Odysseus’s cunning is that the detached, instrumental mind, by submissively embracing nature, renders to nature what is hers and thereby cheats her (DE, p.45).” In the battle between the promise of unbounded liberation through enlightenment and the potential obliteration of individual subjectivity in the process, the initial spirit of enlightenment is thus regained.

By using the story of the Sirens to elaborate on their claim that Enlightenment thought, if not engaged in conjunction with individual reflection, can actually restrict freedom, Adorno and Horkheimer bring the role of seduction into philosophical consideration. The link between seduction and cunning is not incidental here. In the Homeric works, the thematic shift that occurs between the Iliad and the Odyssey can be characterized as a narrative movement from the proud display of might and power to one that extols the benefits of cunning and creativity. Indeed, as Adorno and Horkheimer continue to assert, throughout the Odyssey giving in to seductive temptation is periodically portrayed as a human weakness that draws ire from the gods and leads to a forgetfulness that causes Odysseus and company to lose sight of their goals (DE,
The overall aim of Adorno and Horkheimer’s use of this analogy is to show that at each juncture it is through intellectual prowess, i.e., sheer cunning, that Odysseus, “has hit upon the arrangement by which he as a subject need not be subjected” to the pitfalls of an ambiguous and often deceptive logic of domination (DE, p.59).

However, it seems that couched within this account of the *Odyssey* is a notion similar to Whiting’s assessment of the critics’ initial reaction to Lichtenstein’s work as an achievement of the, “masculinist definition of the cool and controlled creator against the feminine threat of absorption by consumer culture” (Whiting, 1997, p.120). In drawing this parallel it is possible to recognize, once again, the various manifestations of a highly problematic tendency to valorize the masculine and demonize the feminine, not to mention re-inscribe the essentialist flaws that underwrite such efforts. These practices are very much related to issues of embodiment and freedom, and can result in palpable ramifications, including unjust domination and suffering. Yet they are contained in what is ostensibly an ethical critique of Enlightenment thought. Thus, this seems to suggest that a reconsideration of the significance of the Sirens story in regard to heretofore assumed relationships between work, production, and power is in order.

### a. Adorno and the Sirens: Aspects of Seduction That Were Overlooked

Rebecca Comay encapsulates Adorno’s reading of the *Odyssey* as one that can be understood as both the product of exile from a war-torn homeland as well as to a relationship with the feminine as radical Otherness:

> The threat of shipwreck has become a universal fact. Once more it is

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8 According to Adorno and Horkheimer, “…they yield to hunger and slaughter the Sun’s flocks, and they eat the fruit of the lotus and forget about their homes.”
a question of distraction and dispersal. Once more a question of a premature
and hence preemptive pleasure. Once more it is a question of an
impossible relationship to death. Once more it is a question of seduction
through the ear. The propriety of the phallic subject is once more
threatened by an emasculating voice which penetrates everywhere
because it is located nowhere in space and time (Comay, 2000, p.31).
The Sirens would thus appear to pose a threat, not simply to undoing the norms of sexual identity,
but to the totality of the systemic order upon which these social constructions depend. They also
seem to speak to the notion of an apparent division between physical, productive labor and a
notion of intellectual leisure that is often used to support the differentiation of social classes.
Specifically, Comay observes that the spatial relationship described on the ship:

…between Odysseus above (inert but "sensitive") and the sailors below
(deaf but active) is the founding opposition between intellectual and
manual labor on which class society as such depends. The sailors with
their plugged up ears are like the factory workers of the modern age:
busy hands, strong arms, senses dulled by the brutalizing boredom of
wage labor. Odysseus strapped to the mast in solitary delectation would
be the bourgeois as modern concertgoer, taking cautious pleasure in
"art" as an idle luxury to be enjoyed at safe remove (Comay, 2000, p.22).

In the age of administered society, in which a consumer culture grows increasingly detached
from meaningful, productive labor and art is primarily a product of the culture industry, the
modern Odysseus has not only lost all sight of home, but would seemingly rather drown than ask
for help.
Although this opposition seems subject to the same questions and criticisms facing dualism, I believe that it is still analogous to real changes taking place in the socioeconomic makeup of America. Following technological breakthroughs that paved the way for mass-production in manufacturing, production rates in the United States soared and a vast array of affordable consumer goods appeared on the open market. While many still worked directly in labor and production (as well as remained in the ranks of the lower income brackets) an emergent American middle class arose to create the consumer culture that Adorno criticizes for fetishizing the new and gimmicky while producing relatively little of value in relation to what it consumes.

Adorno finds conceptual similarities between increased commodification, the rise of consumer culture, and the forces of domination at work in anti-Semitism and fascism (DE). In his re-telling of the *Odyssey*, the Sirens present the temptation to become willingly complicit in one’s own domination, and perhaps the domination of others as well. It is curious, then, that the role of seduction is not more prominent in his work. Although Adorno does mention the seductive powers of mass culture elsewhere, as in his writings on popular music, for example, it is done in passing and not given a great deal of philosophical attention in its own right. Rather, in Adorno’s work seduction seems to be largely equated with a type of coercive totalitarianism, making the culture industry into a monopoly that an individual liquidated of subjectivity has little recourse to resist. Essentially, on this view, the culture industry puts the “products” of culture on the market and, despite some variation, they are all basically similar in reaffirming the status

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9 Adorno was particularly concerned about young people being “seduced by” jazz.
The result, Adorno claims, is a type of self-identification with the forces of domination that foster the non-reflective implementation of instrumental reason in perpetuating it.

What Adorno misses in his assessment, however, is the peculiar way in which seduction operates. As discussed in Chapter One, seduction involves a particularly alluring kind of deception which ostensibly implies a greater degree of personal complicity than is found in coercion. Even in cases where one subscribes to an ideology because one has either little choice between similar options or little knowledge of alternatives, in acts of seduction the promise of some reward or end is held out in a way such that an individual generally knows, at least on some level, that it is unlikely to be delivered completely in accordance with that promise. Yet that individual submits to the temptation all the same. This procedural difference is significant because Adorno is heralding a warning against the patterns of totalitarian oppression that involves domination by and self-identification with an aggressor (AT, pp.283 and p.392). However, in cases of seduction, there might not be a readily apparent “aggressor” at all.

In addition, although Adorno did write at great length on his concerns linking hypostatization and commodification to a growing consumer culture, his death in 1969 preceded major economic changes in America. Once the world’s undisputed leading super power, propelled by technological innovation and a subsequent manufacturing boom, the United States has gradually experienced diminished growth in manufacturing and instead moved closer to becoming a service industry economy. Even though production levels stayed relatively high

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10 Even when Adorno praises Proust for having the seemingly Hegelian insight that the social norms of the upper classes are largely meaningless yet all the more often held in esteem by those who believe that aspiring to them will lead to personal satisfaction, Adorno still notes that Proust does so, “with the infallibility of himself susceptible,” to the seductive fiction of modern life (Minima Moralia, §122, p.189). Yet he does not elaborate on this particular susceptibility or how it can be avoided.
overall in comparison to other nations, the consumption of goods and energy increased at a significantly higher rate, creating international trade deficits in virtually every area except agriculture (America.gov Archive, 2008). America’s consumption habits were suddenly being fed all the more frequently by foreign, less developed nations that did not enjoy the same standards of living as the ones they supplied. Meanwhile, global tolerance for both corporate and consumer debt have skyrocketed in comparison to the times in which Adorno was writing. Although he seems to have accurately predicted some of the potential pitfalls of an overly commodified existence, and certainly the rise in “disposable” income spending by the end of the 1960s, the exponential growth in the consumer credit system had only just begun. The seductive allure of “buy now, pay later” has since had a dramatic impact on carrying personal debt and consumer bankruptcies. In a nutshell, things have changed quite a bit since the bygone days when individual consumers mainly used credit on rare occasions to purchase a house or vehicle and had difficulty qualifying for a credit card.

It seems to me that these changes also raise concerns about the degree to which a mass manufacturing model of commodification continues to be relevant for dealing with current social issues. If this is the case, and seduction is in fact underexplored in Adorno’s work, then the apparently inadequate examination of seduction in Adorno’s thought means that seduction must be accounted for if it is to remain relevant and useful as a critical theory. I wish to argue, then, that while Adorno’s critical theory should not be hastily rejected because of this inadequacy, it does need to be expanded in order to better account for seductive practices.

In the section that follows I will take as my starting point Gilles Lipovetsky’s philosophical writings on fashion, wherein fashion is depicted as a commodified practice operating via a mode of seduction. Employing Lipovetsky’s work will help further my argument
that a paradigm shift has occurred between commodification as a coercive practice and commodification as a seductive practice. However, there is also divergence in thought as to whether giving adequate attention to seduction is pivotal for ethicists considering freedom within societies that exhibit high levels of commodification. For although Lipovetsky’s work seems to support much of what I am proposing in regard to the role of seductive forces today, we appear to disagree on how this relates to ethics as well as to Adorno’s thought and the viability of employing similar methods to ethical questions and cultural criticism. Lipovetsky’s interpretation of what this increased role of seduction means leads to very different and, in my opinion, problematic conclusions about the role of commodification in contemporary society. For this reason I will first utilize Lipovetsky’s research to establish points of convergence regarding commodification and seduction, and I will then address our points of divergence as well.

(iv) Seduction Now Rivals Coercion as a Widespread Means of Influence and Control

In *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing in Modern Democracy* Gilles Lipovetsky puts forth an extensive account of fashion, first defining it in a narrow sense referring primarily to clothing and other bodily accoutrements, and then in a broader sense of that which is *fashionable*, meaning popular or “in vogue” as a prevailing trend in a certain time and culture. Both definitions are relevant to this project. In the narrow sense, clothing and the emergence of the fashion industry appear to provide an ideal nexus for considering the intersection of commodification and embodiment. In the broader sense, what is accepted and considered fashionable by large groups of people could have significant sociopolitical as well as ethical ramifications. Thus, there are individual as well as collective stakes tied to fashion.
Fashion, however, is not a subject that has previously garnered much in the way of philosophical consideration. Whether deemed too inconsequential or simply overlooked, it was not until the late twentieth century that fashion began to gain a modicum of respect as a serious topic of inquiry in the philosophical literature. Moreover, whenever fashion was addressed it tended to be portrayed, for the most part, in an unfavorable light. For example, numerous feminist critiques of fashion contend that it is highly coercive in nature, illustrating its use as a method of social control that does harm to women by subjugating them to a predominantly male gaze and patriarchal order.\(^{11}\) On this view, the production and mass marketing capabilities of the modern fashion industry (and its close relative, the “beauty” industry) are typically seen as furthering sexist oppression by dramatically expanding the objectification and exploitation of women. Similarly, a number of postcolonial critiques of fashion have commented on its coercive properties as a tool in furthering colonial oppression. These accounts generally assert that fashion has helped facilitate domination and oppression by colonizers who either passively asserted the superiority of the colonizing culture’s norms or actively worked to eradicate the remnants of traditional indigenous dress and cultural identification.\(^{12}\) In sum, it should be acknowledged that a body of literature on fashion exists, much of which makes compelling arguments for the coercive properties of fashion.

\(^{11}\) This has been addressed by a number of thinkers, and a condensed yet concise discussion of the topic can be found in Joanne Hollows’ *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Yet does the fashion industry truly demonstrate coercive properties? Should fashion necessarily be viewed as a sort of cultural aggressor, irreversibly bent on reproducing its own values? Lipovetsky’s take on fashion, it will be shown, is far more charitable, and he is not alone among recent scholars presenting challenges to some of these arguments. Still, I wish to state at the outset that my aim here is neither to summarily endorse these challenges nor to undermine the aforementioned evidence of historical and conceptual links between fashion and coercion.

Rather, what interests me most in Lipovetsky’s work is his assertion that the seductive aspects of fashion, as well as seduction more broadly conceived, play key roles in understanding life in contemporary society but remain underrepresented in the literature and are deserving of greater attention. Moreover, even if fashion is not necessarily coercive, this does not rule out the possibility that it is seductive. In fact, this might be a better understanding of the logic through which it operates. This I do believe to be defensible and very much in keeping with the aims of this project.

a. The Passion of Fashion: The Intersection of Body and Commodification Represents a Paradigm Shift

The public at large is arguably more educated on the coercive aspects of fashion today than at any other previous time. Strictly looking at fashion in the narrow sense, far greater numbers of individuals are now, more than ever before, aware of how fashion functions in a variety of social senses such as, but not limited to: establishing community and culture, reinforcing traditional gender roles, expressing signs of social status, affecting body type norms,
and so forth. Quite commonly this discussion includes views that severely disparage the fashion industry for promoting, if not creating, social pressures to conform to certain standards of appearance and behavior that, for many, have very real negative consequences. Yet even if these are no longer rare topics to encounter in university classes, mass media, and elsewhere, one might ask, why is the fashion industry doing so well? Instead of shrinking under the scrutiny, it actually expanded from the end of the twentieth century through to the second decade of the twenty-first.

Why do so many people who are well aware that they are viewed as target markets to be manipulated by the images of the fashion industry, still willingly hand over tens, hundreds, or even thousands of dollars for a simple shirt, pair of shoes, or half ounce bottle of a beauty product? According to Lipovetsky’s review of the literature, the two main difficulties that plague many past theories of fashion are that they either a) start from a prejudicial moral standpoint or b) rely too heavily upon class distinctions. In the case of the former, changes in fashion are often demonized at the outset for posing a threat to religious tradition or prevailing cultural norms of “good taste” (EF). Any change is viewed as a threat to social order and so

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13 Topics related to fashion, beauty, and body image are now frequently addressed in college courses, and the effects of fashion marketing, as well as how to change and overcome them, are discussed in mass media outlets fairly regularly.

14 See IBISWorld Industry Reports, “Future looks bright: This industry has grown at a robust pace over recent years, with the globalization of the fashion industry supporting growth in demand for specialist designers. The decline in the local manufacturing sector hasn't deterred demand for local design input, and low trade barriers have encouraged smaller players to compete with industry heavyweights. Advancements in technology and the globalization of the fashion industry will continue to underpin solid industry growth.” http://www.ibisworld.com/industry/default.aspx?indid=1413, November 2, 2009.
these approaches, lacking in unbiased critical evaluation, should be rejected for committing the fallacy of appealing to tradition.

As for the latter cases, fashion is understood as principally tied to class distinctions in which members of an upper, aristocratic class seek to distinguish themselves from members of lower economic classes. The lower classes, in turn, view fashion as symbolically important to achieving upward mobility, thus leading fashion’s detractors to satirically mock the excesses of the rich and those who envy and attempt to emulate them (EF). What this type of theory fails to address, Lipovetsky asserts, is a perpetual desire for novelty and aesthetic invention in fashion that seems to cross the boundaries of class consciousness. Even if it is still possible to find ample evidence for the ties between fashion and status, as I believe it is, a great many years have passed since a true aristocratic class could be held as largely responsible for setting the standard for fashion aspirations. The emergent mass production technologies of the garment industry changed the fashion landscape dramatically, causing what essentially amounted to a middle class, consumer-driven collapse of the European model of fashion prior to 1860 (EF). *Haute couture* fashion still exists, but by 1960 so did racks upon racks of affordable, ready-to-wear *faux couture* clones. Near the end of the 1960s, fashion trends were becoming increasingly less likely to emulate upper or even middle class values and instead of a top-down driven model of fashion, the fashion industry scrambled to replicate the free-spiritedness of a bohemian youth culture seeking its own personal expression. A symbology of status still had its place in the fashion industry, but traditional class distinctions seemed less important than wealth when anyone with enough funds could purchase whatever they wanted, either affirming or purposely rejecting the alleged values of different classes.
Also missing from such approaches, Lipovetsky contends, is an appreciation for fashion’s connection to a growing sense of individual autonomy that is reflected in personal expression. To illustrate what he means, just one example is the trajectory of swimwear and the move from constricting and cumbersome full body swimming costumes to the modern bikini. Unlike critiques of fashion that would largely identify concerns, at least for women, with the conformity to standards of modesty demanded by the bathing suits of the 1920s as well as with the problematic body image issues that are perpetuated by the contemporary desire for a so-called “bikini” body, Lipovetsky asserts that changes in sportswear also denote an increased participation in sporting activities and a newfound freedom to expose more of one’s body for reasons of improved functionality. This increased freedom of movement was then carried over to the development of more practical and comfortable every day wear (EF, p.62). So the trajectory is not entirely positive or negative with regard to lasting effects on society. What such examples seem to indicate is that, at the very least, the lineage of fashion is not entirely one of coercion and oppression. Yet there is more to it than that.

Obviously, one might be hard-pressed if not utterly foolish to attempt to make the case that the popularity of the bikini is mainly due to its functionality in the water. For many, it is unmistakably based in cultural norms of physical attractiveness and sex appeal. This too, Lipovetsky holds, is a form of personal expression, and an unapologetically frivolous testament to desire at that (EF, p.62). Regardless, it still does not fit within the rigidly defined constraints of a theory which holds that class distinctions are the main force behind fashion. What catapulted the bikini from being a daring and risqué act of fashion rebellion to suddenly entering the realm of mass acceptance and popularity was not the direct result of some sort of class conflict. Rather, it was its appearance in Hollywood movies. When audiences saw sex symbols
such as Brigitte Bardot, Betty Grable, and Sophia Loren sporting bikinis on the silver screen, consumer demand for them soared and the fashion industry was happy to meet this demand.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, lest the impression be made that such examples are limited to females, there are also male corollaries to this kind of fashion phenomenon, such as how onscreen appearances by Marlon Brando, John Wayne, and James Dean propelled the plain white T-shirt from being perceived as a simple, inexpensive undergarment to become a hotly desired, “must-have” commodity.\textsuperscript{16} What movie-going audiences viewed in the amount of time it takes to watch a film transferred into what many then wanted to emulate in their own physical appearances. On some level most people likely understood that purchasing a bikini or a T-shirt would not actually transform them into Brando or Bardot or a facsimile of the characters they played. Still, the seductive illusion, however fleeting, that they too would possess these characteristics to some degree was enough to tide them over until the next fashion trend came along.

By Lipovetsky’s account, it would seem that such examples would not be merely anecdotal but in fact exemplary of how fashion operates. Rarely, if ever, could one really be said to specifically need a bikini or a particular kind of T-shirt. Yet it appears as though a great many people might be swayed into thinking that they do, without a hint of coercion coming to the forefront of the minds. Furthermore, the logic of fashion has both expanded in the macro sense of the global marketplace as well as extended, in the micro space, onto the individual as type of

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branding and self-created identity. Fashion, with all of its ephemerality, commodification, and media-promoted allure, can no longer be said to simply reflect society. Rather, Lipovetsky asserts that fashion has become its major restructuring force and that, “In our societies, fashion is in the driver’s seat. In less than half a century, attractiveness and evanescence have become organizing principles in modern life” (EF, 6).

Fashion writ large is virtually everywhere. It is a form of commodity, and it is one that operates primarily via the mode of seduction. To be accurate, commodification can no longer be considered simply in terms of coercion, but must also have the distinct mechanisms of seduction taken into account.

(v) Points of Divergence Between Lipovetsky and Adorno and Their Ethical Implications

A good deal of what Lipovetsky states appears to be in line with Adorno’s critique of commodification and the culture industry as a mass-manipulator which employs various media to create false needs which are then met by the mass-producer of standardized, commodified cultural products. It might seem surprising, then, that despite the apparent similarities previously discussed here that Lipovetsky harshly criticizes Adorno’s thought. Moreover, these divergences will have important ethical implications.

Lipovetsky does acknowledge that, “as long ago as the 1940s,” Adorno was on the forefront of providing commentary on the, “fusion of culture, advertising, and industrialized entertainment” (EF, p.8). However, Lipovetsky believes that there is insufficient evidence to conclude that the totalitarian society Adorno envisioned with his characterization of the culture industry ever actually materialized or that is likely to in the future. Lipovetsky states that:
The denunciation of the consummate stage of fashion has taken on its most virulent tones in the domain of the life of the mind. In analyzing media culture as a reason-destroying machine, a totalitarian enterprise designed to do away with autonomous thought, the intelligentsia has made common cause, speaking with one voice to stigmatize the degrading dictatorship of the consumable, the infamy of the culture industries (EF, p.8).

In this vein, Lipovetsky includes Adorno among a number of thinkers, including Max Horkheimer, Jurgen Habermas, Guy Debord, and others, whom he believes unfairly stigmatized the consumable as degrading by nature and who falsely predicted that dire consequences of mass-media manipulation would surely follow. To the contrary, Lipovetsky goes on to argue that increased commodification has in fact fostered democracy and pluralism by uniting commonly oriented consumers in a way that cuts across societal divisions such as economic classes and subcultures. Hence, Lipovetsky dismisses what he views as attempts, seemingly not unlike my own, to recapitulate the old, “offensive against fashion and media-induced brain rot” while at the same time being, “quick to follow its lead, adopting similar hyperbolic techniques, the *sine qua non* of conceptual one-upmanship” (EF, p.8).

To begin my response, I wish to strongly question the degree to which Lipovetsky can place Adorno’s thought in the same company as that of Habermas and Debord, respectively, and then summarily reject them all without offering any direct critical engagement or elaboration on this position with textual support. On the surface, linking Adorno with Horkheimer makes more sense given their co-authorship of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and their writings on the culture industry therein. However, in virtually the same breath Lipovetsky then places them both within a lineage of followers of either Marx or Heidegger, whom Lipovetsky claims collectively fail to break-free of a broadly anti-technological moralizing (EF, p.8). This, seemingly unfairly,
falls short of addressing the later, single-authored works in which Adorno seeks to distance himself from both Heideggerians and Marxists on a number of points related to individual freedom.

Nonetheless, since Lipovetsky’s principle aim is to advance a thesis on fashion rather than specifically to counter Adorno’s views it is possible to be a bit generous in giving him the benefit of the doubt for not articulating his charges in greater detail. That is, Lipovetsky’s generalization seems to refer to what he views as a common tendency of late twentieth century philosophers to concentrate too closely on systemic powers of domination as coercion. As Lipovetsky describes:

A soft totalitarianism, we are told, has infiltrated our democracies: it has successfully sown contempt for culture; it has generalized re-gression and mental confusion. We are fully ensconced in "barbarianism," according to the latest jingle of our antimodern philosophers (EF, pp. 8-9).

According to Lipovetsky, philosophical critiques portraying mass production and commodification as forms of domination and coercive control largely amounted to unwarranted doom-saying about catastrophic consequences that failed to materialize. What they neglected to comprehend was a changing societal dynamic that was moving away from administered life dominated primarily by coercion. Instead, it is seduction which defines our current age and this is keenly evidenced by fashion, particularly in the broad sense of what is fashionable.

Furthermore, he asserts that with these organizing principles at work society has not descended into irrationality as might have been expected. Despite the fleeting accoutrements and decoration that comprise the bells and whistles of many fashion fads, fashion is not an entirely irrational system. According to Lipovetsky, “No system of fashion exists without the
conjunction of two logical systems” which are: a) the system of ephemera and b) the system of aesthetic fantasy (EF, p.25). This conjunction, “formally defines the fashion mechanism” (EF, p.25). As such, fashion and seduction remain very much intertwined.

The resulting paradox would then be that seduction, as a formal mechanism, actually reduces irrationality. Today’s consumers are not irrational, he maintains, but just the opposite. In general, they recognize that their desires are unlikely to be fulfilled “as advertised,” yet they are supremely educated on the choices available to them. Vastly more channels broadcasting on television means increased opportunities to watch or not to watch, and the control is in the hands of the viewer. Similarly, the Internet has revolutionized content delivery with its seemingly limitless possibilities for worldwide, self-guided access to information, entertainment, social networking, and more.17 A variety of media material is now delivered via cellular phone. Examples abound from any number of consumer goods and service sectors. Although the fashion industry can and certainly does advertise, of the myriads of clothing options introduced each year only a fraction will interest consumers, and this too will depend upon how well they succeed in meeting the public’s desires. The accelerated pace at which information flows and, seemingly, individualized needs can be met, fosters both human fantasy and an acceptance of disposability that in many ways frees consumers from concern over the lasting consequences of their choices. Instead of homogenized commodification, consumers see their choices multiplying exponentially via marginal differences that are evaluated according to how well they meet their immediate needs and not simply according to outdated notions of social class. Individual desires are cultivated in a world of promotion and advertising where image is everything and pleasure reigns

17 While this certainly varies around the globe according to infrastructure, affluence, and both public and private regulation of access and content, the overall expansion and impact of the Internet is undeniable.
supreme. The desire to achieve satisfaction, regardless of how fleeting or imperfect, is a shared one that unites large numbers of people from a great many varied backgrounds through consumption.

In sum, Lipovetsky contends that seduction is a mode of power active in commodification, but it is distinct from coercion in that it is based in superficiality, attractiveness, and evanescence instead of force or threat. Society is currently under the spell of seduction to the degree that it has become an organizing principle in contemporary life. On these two points our positions largely converge. However, Lipovetsky then concludes that the seemingly paradoxical end result is not hegemonic totalitarianism and the obliteration of culture but rather, increased rationality, greater individual freedom, more democratic behavior on the whole, and a collective increase in political pluralistic tolerance. It is the latter half of this conclusion which presents an objection to my claim that commodification as seduction is at best ethically ambiguous, and at worst, extremely ethically problematic, and to which I will now begin to respond.

a. The Case for Why It Matters That Seductive Practices Receive Serious Ethical Consideration

I have been building a case that a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction has occurred in widespread commodification practices, which implies that in order for ethicists to better address systemic structures of oppression they must recognize and address not only the role of commodification in contemporary life, but also the growing significance of seduction as a distinct form of commodification. Lipovetsky’s arguments create a bit of a predicament for reaching this end. On the one hand, the evidence he cites through the lens of fashion and its seemingly ubiquitous presence in today’s society provides excellent support for this premise through the following three claims: a) that mass consumerism is more than just a simple
reflection of purchasing power b) commodification is so rampant that it often plays an integral part in shaping the human condition and c) there has in fact been a major shift toward an era marked by seductive rather than merely coercive practices.

On the other hand, however, the further conclusions that Lipovetsky draws, if correct, would create difficulties for my overall position. As mentioned previously, he rejects Adorno and Marx for allegedly demonizing the consumable and then predicting dire consequences that, he asserts, never materialized. He also similarly criticizes Michel Foucault for relating advertising to power, disciplinary control, and the body while analyzing societal structures which Lipovetsky considers to be outdated, in part because of their inattention to seduction (EF, p.77 and p.163). If such methods are indeed practically obsolete, then it raises questions about the value of continuing to approach these matters in a similar vein. Furthermore, whereas I am cautioning against overlooking potential injustices that can occur as a result of an inattention to seduction as a form of commodification, Lipovetsky presents challenges to this viewpoint which bear consideration. I will argue, however, that Lipovetsky’s challenges can be overcome.

To begin, in order to be fair to Lipovetsky it should be stated that just as I freely admit that all seduction need not be judged necessarily bad or wrong at the outset or in all situations, Lipovetsky is not so naïve as to suggest that in this era of seduction we are either living in ideal times or at least well on our way. On the whole he is careful to mention both benefits and costs while not becoming effusive about this current moment in time. Moreover, it would seem that each of us must concede to some degree of ethical ambiguity in determining how seduction factors into ethical decision-making and judgment.

Yet my view and Lipovetsky’s still differ on a very serious point, and this is what matters most to this project. Although Lipovetsky does acknowledge that a consequence of this
paradigm shift means that life may become more chaotic and subject to the sway of changing fashions and shallow consumerism, he nonetheless still holds that because seduction has come to function as such a pervasive, albeit nebulous, constitutive factor in existence, it paradoxically encourages critical thinking and promotes democracy. Responsibility rests with the individual, as something to be determined personally but with a general view toward the common good as operating within a shared world of fashion and consumption. Commodification aids, rather than hinders, this on a grand scale.

If Lipovetsky is correct, then there is no great need to give seduction serious ethical consideration or be particularly concerned with its ramifications. If Lipovetsky is incorrect, however, seductive practices could falsely mimic modes of freedom, actually hinder that freedom, and lead to unjust domination or even suffering. Thus, with much at stake, I will proceed by taking a closer look at his reasoning for arriving at this conclusion and begin to respond so as to demonstrate that while the initial diagnosis is correct, his understanding of the implications are mistaken and seriously problematic.

b. An Initial Response to Lipovetsky, Starting with Adorno

First, even though I have been asserting that, indeed, seduction has not been adequately addressed in Adorno’s thought, my intention has not been to argue that his view should be rejected entirely. Rather, my aim is to advance the position that if this lack of philosophical attention to seduction can be brought to the forefront and better understood within Adorno’s framework, particularly in regard to commodification and culture, it would escape this limitation and cease to be outdated. For much of the global population, human life has become unprecedentedly subjected to a constant influx of media through an ever-expanding variety of technologies. Life and art, even highly commodified art, are very closely intertwined in today’s
world and to a greater degree than in the period of radio, film, and television that Adorno was using as a basis for his work. Even though he may not have intended it as such, his aesthetic theory can still be applied as a forceful dialectic tool for uncovering societal tensions that warrant ethical consideration.

Moreover, Adorno never claims that the structural categories his theory brings to light are either necessities or permanently fixed. To the contrary, on my reading, criticism becomes compulsory precisely because these structures can be transformed. It would then seem that as the structures change, the dialectic process demands that ethicists employing this methodological tool should reconsider and adapt their models and methods as well. Thus, by shifting focus from coercion to seduction, applying a similar aesthetic method of critique can be extremely useful for uncovering structural forms of domination, injustice, and limitations on freedom when other methods fall short.

Second, particularly in relation to issues of ethical responsibility, the paradigm shift from coercion to seduction complicates the traditional understanding of volition in regard to ethical questions. It does not imply a complete reversal. As to his conclusion, then, I will contest Lipovetsky’s suggestion that embracing seduction provides a way by which we might, at the very least, make coming to terms with life in a highly commodified society seem more palatable or, at the other end of the spectrum, even go so far as to provide a means by which to completely defend increased commodification.

c. Reiterating the Potential Objection and Foregrounding a More Detailed Response

As stated previously, Lipovetsky’s view is aligned with Adorno in tethering the expansion of mass media technologies to the production of a mass culture within which societal members are defined first and foremost as consumers. Contrary to Adorno’s view, however, for
Lipovetsky mass culture is not explicitly defined by a loss of self to the administrating forces that surround it. Rather, Lipovetsky claims that, on one level, a large degree of personal autonomy is preserved as consumers are individuated by their choices. By being better educated on market forces, even to the likelihood that little will ever be delivered completely as promised much less last for any length of time, consumers are free to make wiser decisions. Presumably, in turn, each decision made as a consumer serves to create a unique personal identity. It would seem, then, that the disposability of products goes hand in hand with the disposability of identities, which can be changed and altered either by whim or careful design. On the surface, this appears to be liberating, at least for those who value individualism.

A second point on which he initially seems to concur with Adorno is by acknowledging that the constant bombardment of media and an oversaturation of desire-satisfying opportunities leads to distress and is a significant factor in creating personal and societal instability. For example, fashion can and often is, as much about trying to fit in with others as it is with trying to establish a sense of self. When extrapolated into broader terms of what is “fashionable” to think or do in a given circumstance, this seems to imply a collective gullibility and susceptibility to influential forces. Yet contra-Adorno, Lipovetsky maintains that this is true but also temporary and, barring some caveats and trade-offs, seductive commodification and consumerism ultimately result in a common social orientation. The fact that around the world millions of people are listening to the same songs or buying the same brand of watch illustrates that people are united by their common desires through the superficiality of what is in fashion (EF, p.174). In the long run this allegedly renders people less susceptible to extreme ideologies and helps to sustain a fairly tolerant pluralism.
To support his argument Lipovetsky asserts that political rhetoric can and should be viewed as another manifestation of fashion. He is scarcely the first to note that contemporary politics has become virtually inseparable from advertising and promotion, and he states that a number of classic arguments have vilified this alliance for:

…producing needs that are precisely adapted to the supply; it allows producers to program the marketplace, to subvert the freedom of consumers… By scientifically designing tastes and aspirations, by conditioning private lives, advertising only hastens the advent of a fundamentally totalitarian society (EF, p.162).

Following in the tradition of propaganda machines, on this type of analysis, advertising reduces free elections and party systems to puppet shows fronting deep-seated, manipulative economic and bureaucratic power.

The troubling part of Lipovetsky’s view begins, in my estimation, as he moves away from this assessment and ultimately reaches the conclusion that in an era distinguished by seduction, the structural logic of totalitarianism is no longer in operation. His argument, which I will describe in further detail below, hinges on his interpretation of freedom within a highly commodified society dominated by advertising and the ephemeral.

Lipovetsky holds that advertising is a prime influencer on humans and the choices they make, but he believes that it systemically lacks the discipline and rigidity of totalitarian coercion necessary for social control. Contesting Foucault, Lipovetsky contends that with advertising there is scant evidence of bodies being mechanistically conditioned toward particular civic orientations or, for that matter, of “rationally” coordinated schemes aimed to program and regiment general human behavior (EF, p.163). In addition, going against Hannah Arendt, he contends that advertising is neither deeply entrenched in the belief in transformative possibilities
with regard to human nature nor part of larger end-game bent on programming social reform or mind-control (EF, pp.163-4). The purpose of advertising is to encourage consumption. Presumably, whether consumption refers to products, ideas, or campaign promises is irrelevant. Advertising relies on entertainment, novelty, and cravings for pleasure and well-being in order to stimulate human desire. Although persuasive in nature, it nonetheless permits spontaneity and retains the possibility for consumers to choose otherwise or to not act at all. None of which, it seems, has very much in common with the coercive machinations of totalitarianism.

Furthermore, Lipovetsky asserts, advertising has high stakes for businesses and similar entities (including political parties), but relatively low stakes for individuals (EF, p.165). These entities need consumers to survive, but humans are always free to take their business, beliefs, or votes elsewhere. Instead of obliterating freedom, or even unilaterally conditioning people toward uniformity, advertising presents a space for non-standardizing competition. In this way, by embracing advertising’s seductive properties, politicians benefit from a kind of show-business appeal. They also incur similar challenges as political campaigns struggle to fight homogeneity and win support while still appealing to the masses.

Hence, Lipovetsky attests that, “the fashion form, far from being antithetical to an opening of politics, makes politics possible for a growing segment of the population” (EF, p.170).” The seductive ephemerality, superficiality and disposability of fashion, when combined with media, ad-industry semiotics, and a market economy, make political involvement more attractive and seemingly accessible to average citizens. This in turn has not led to a complete rejection of personal responsibility, but instead has broadened debate on ethics and morality and
included more participants in the political process (EF, p.250).\textsuperscript{18} The fact that it is a distanced, more mediated participation is supposedly not undesirable here, for it ultimately supports diversity and pluralism by making citizens less likely to interfere directly in the lives of their neighbors. A logic of fashion, via politics, thus plays a central role in strengthening widespread democracy and preserving the liberal values of individualism combined with respect and a willingness to aid others.

This conclusion strikes me as deeply problematic, however. Even if members of diverse cultures and social strata are in some ways united by, for example, the mass appreciation and replication of Lichtenstein poster prints or consumer goods in popular culture, it is quite a leap from this observation to claiming that a common orientation toward seductive ephemerality has enhanced global democracy and freedom. Has a consumer-based democracy really replaced the threat of totalitarianism in much of the world? Moreover, what are the implications if Lipovetsky is wrong?

By claiming that seduction as a form of commodification leads to politically situated subjects that are more ethically aware as well as resistant to forces of ideological extremism, Lipovetsky might initially appear vulnerable to a long list of counter-examples to illustrate otherwise. Regardless of how tempting this might be, it would be a misrepresentation of his argument by depicting it as a straw person, all too easily knocked down. Lipovetsky readily admits to the continued existence of such intolerant discourses as racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and religious fanaticism (EF, p.250). However, in doing so he places these extremists on the margins, as exceptions caused by civic ills such as unemployment, exclusion

\textsuperscript{18} In support of this claim Lipovetsky makes references to volunteerism as well as ongoing public dialogues regarding abortion rights, vivisection, smoking policies, and drug laws.
from the social order, and an inability to adequately participate in the culture of consumption in a way that leaves individuals feeling disaffected about their future possibilities (EF, p.251). His point is not that incidences of social ills have vanished, but rather that they ebb and flow while being kept in check by widespread democracy. He claims that because of the way in which fashion functions, totalitarian regimes will never rise to the prominence they once had in previous centuries. The true threat, he maintains, is no longer from fascist totalitarianism but rather, from provisional inequalities and “social chasms” within concurrent democratic systems:

… the dualization of democracies, the gap between rich and poor, between exclusive neighborhoods and ghettos, between the work force and the unemployed, between well-integrated citizens and marginal figures, between high quality education and a deteriorating school system, between hospitals on the cutting edge and a disastrous system of health insurance (EF, p. 251).

Although fashion alone will not cure these problems, he asserts, it does provide a non-deterministic system in which individuals, as well as political bodies, remain flexible and capable of voluntary action to restructure the world according to value prioritization. Moreover, he claims that both participatory democracy and the political apathy of those within a system of fashion serve to further this possibility. “Let us not fool ourselves,” Lipovetsky states, “no exit from the system of the ephemeral and seduction is thinkable or even desirable… the unreasonableness of fashion calls for, and paves the way for, an extra measure of enlightened reason” (EF, p.251). All outer constraints notwithstanding, he maintains that despite ongoing problems there are always opportunities for re-inventing democracy and the free marketplace in order to effectively readjust the course of the future. Thus, he concludes that the lasting,
coercive forces of totalitarianism have been extinguished and replaced by seduction in this highly commodified world.

Optimistic as that may sound, I beg to differ with this assessment of totalitarianism. Although it may not be possible to extricate society from seduction and commodification, and one would at least hope that there is no need to accept a pessimistic fatalism toward future events, Lipovetsky’s assertion that fascist totalitarianism be can relegated to the past should spark concern.

A main claim that I will take issue with is the degree to which these social chasms and other oppressive inequalities are mere exceptions within an imperfect, but nonetheless superior system thanks to seduction and commodification. That is, Lipovetsky claims that fashion is not to blame for contemporary social challenges; poverty and violence have existed throughout history, and there are a wide variety of responses to these problems that vary across the board in politically democratic systems. In insisting that fashion has produced a better alternative to a bygone era of totalitarian fascism, he also maintains a need to recognize the dualistic nature of a logic that purportedly leads to, “more self-control, more mobility, more integration for the majority” by acknowledging that at the same time democracies inevitably create a space for a certain amount of subversion against their own tenets (EF, p.252). The task at hand, he claims, is figuring out how to use individual freedom in a socially responsible manner to better manage the simultaneous rise of “marginalization,” “delinquency,” and “lawlessness” of those caught up in the potentially self-destructive trappings of fashion’s own frivolity and tendency toward indulging self-interestedness (EF, p.252). To put it another way, Lipovetsky claims that

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19 One example of this would be the way in which a democratic republic can adhere to the value of and rights to free speech and assembly, being obliged to permit the speech and assemblies of those who wish to limit those rights.
democracy reigns, but it perennially risks authoring its own undoing, resulting in a continuous struggle for progress. Effectively, then, this amounts to management by exception.

Yet I wish to question not only the degree to which these inequities and oppressive forces represent anomalies that are, however dangerous, in the minority among an otherwise superior, non-totalitarian system. Rather, I propose to challenge the assessment of freedom as informing a democratic system that Lipovetsky, even with all of his qualifications and caveats, ultimately privileges. Consequently, in the following chapter I will move to respond to this potential objection to my view. In this response I will also argue that ethical theories that deem seduction to be irrelevant to issues of freedom and social justice, or perhaps even beneficial to fighting unjust domination and oppression, are deeply flawed.

(vi) Conclusion

In this chapter I have illustrated that commodification as a seductive practice can alter the ways in which human bodies are viewed, shaped, and considered to be integral parts of a consumerist culture. I have focused on fashion as a nexus at the center of a tension between the human body and external forces of commodification. Specifically, I have noted both critiques of fashion as being largely coercive in nature as well as Lipovetsky’s claims that these critiques might not be entirely correct, and that fashion might foster more freedom than is commonly thought possible.

Lipovetsky presents evidence that fashion operates in ways that are more accurately typified as seductive rather than coercive. He makes a compelling case that the influence of commodification via seduction has reached new levels such that seductive practices have replaced coercive forces as the dominant means of influence in society. Despite attesting to a certain complexity that is not easily resolved, Lipovetsky also asserts that the conceptual ties
between seduction and consumer cultures ultimately result in increased tolerance of others and the near extinction of totalitarian structures. If he is correct, then, this would seemingly reduce or all but eliminate the need to question seductive practices from an ethical perspective. In contrast, I contend that the stakes of focusing on perceived exceptions to an imperfect but otherwise surprisingly, rational and beneficial system rather than the overall systemic structure of seduction itself remain high, particularly for lives caught in the balance or relegated to the margins. This will be examined further in the following chapter.
Fig 4.

Eminem, still from “Born of Fire” commercial advertisement created for Chrysler Group LLC by Wieden & Kennedy, 2011.

“Every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse.”

CHAPTER 3: AND THIS IS WHAT WE DO: LIFE IN SEDUCTIVE TIMES

(i) Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to further defend the claim that if seduction is just as worthy of ethical consideration as coercion, any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element. In the previous chapter, Lichtenstein’s *Drowning Girl* provided a pathway into a careful reconsideration of the tension between the perceived authenticity of the real and the allure of the ephemeral. I argued that as commodification practices expanded in reach, they began to depend upon this allure and other forms of enticement in ways that are much more closely associated with seduction rather than coercion. I also presented how, through the lens of fashion, Lipovetsky’s work provides support for the contention that a paradigm shift has occurred in which seduction has come to be the dominant mode through which commodification practices are enacted.

However, I have also discussed how Lipovetsky does not appear to share the serious ethical concerns that have previously been associated with commodification. Instead, he extols what he deems to be the merits of the ephemeral, the fashionable, and the role of seduction as a democratizing power that provides access and opportunity for real social change, including a reinvigoration of ethical concern that he claims was not possible under the fascist regimes of the past (EF, pp.248-249). If he is correct, then the influx of advertising and commodification into art, politics, and everyday life is not to be feared so much as appreciated. This view is what I will call into question. The commodification practices of today, driven by seductive practices, will be shown to be just as worthy of ethical consideration as the allegedly more coercive practices of the past.
In order to justify the claim that ethical concern surrounding commodification is indeed warranted as well as to demonstrate the importance of approaching seductive practices within commodification with the same degree of seriousness and scrutiny as coercive practices, this chapter will be organized as follows:

First, I will show the explicit connection between commodification and ethical concern by arguing that a feature of seductive commodification is manipulation, and as such it is ethically problematic. This will be accomplished by revisiting, in further detail, the tension between the real and the ephemeral in relation to the mercurial position of art and imagery in a highly commodified society. Attention will be given to the extensive role of the moving image as both art and commodity, and the tangible effects of its influence in society. This will underscore the increasing pervasiveness of commodification as a seductive practice that intersects with ethics in ways that are frequently overlooked.

In reaffirming the diagnosis of a society heavily influenced by commodification, I will also make a case for a link between commodification and totalitarianism, thus beginning to overcome the potential objection posed by Lipovetsky that this is not a reason for ethical concern. Whereas totalitarianism can be defined in a rigid, specific sense of authoritarian government, I will show that totalitarianism can also be defined more broadly according to similar practices found in other institutional practices that inform human life and freedom. Manipulation, I contend, can be found in both “hard” or “soft” forms of totalitarianism and thus, ethical suspicions are warranted in either set of circumstances. Manipulation typically involves deception, exploitation, or mistreatment. Although not strictly identical with coercion in a narrow sense of forcing someone to do something against his or her will, manipulation can also
exhibit coercive tendencies, particularly if the manipulative appeal involves seemingly credible threats.

Consider, for example, a despotic leader who wishes to control all of the communication airwaves in a small country. The despot could, through coercion, send tanks, soldiers, and artillery into the capital city and declare martial law, announcing that any unauthorized person caught broadcasting information will be arrested and killed. Such an act would be expedient, leaving citizens little choice but to comply. However, as a bold act of coercion, it might also draw negative attention from other nations, thus placing the regime under great ethical and political scrutiny. Alternatively, the despot could manipulate the populace into believing that another country is likely to invade soon. This foreign nation is alleged to be monitoring all outgoing broadcasts and to even have operatives broadcasting their own coded information from within the despot’s nation. As citizens grow concerned and request security and protection from the government, they are strongly urged to cease any unauthorized broadcasts, and to report all suspected broadcasting activities as suspicious. The government can then detain the accused and determine their guilt or innocence. In response, the citizens do just that. The citizens are seduced by the promise of protection, which in fact probably leaves them more vulnerable, but the likelihood of the latter example receiving the same kind of political or ethical scrutiny is greatly diminished. Both examples, whether strictly coercive or manipulative but involving coercive properties, can be considered structurally totalitarian. Insofar as pervasive commodification is linked to manipulation, then, it too functions as a totalitarian force.

The next section builds upon these claims by focusing more specifically on the issues of ethics and embodied freedom as they relate to social justice, particularly pertaining to Lipovetsky’s contention that there is a direct relationship between an increase in seductive
practices and what he perceives as a decrease in totalitarianism. What Lipovetsky misses, I will argue, is the distinct way in which commodification as a seductive practice at times relies on fear much in the same way as when fear is utilized in coercion, but once again it is made manifest in procedurally distinct ways. That is, despite key differences in the procedure, at times seductive practices invoke fear in a way that is just as troubling as when fear is invoked using overtly coercive tactics. Even if seductive practices cannot be said to be coercive in the strictest sense of the word, they nonetheless share similarly manipulative characteristics that can be just as ethically problematic as those typically associated with coercive practices.

I will present an alternative view that draws largely on the work of Giorgio Agamben. Although Agamben’s work wasn’t written as a direct response to Lipovetsky, I will show that it presents a compelling counter-argument to his conclusion that totalitarianism is a thing of the past that ethicists no longer need to concern themselves with in any significant way. Rather, I will present a case that totalitarianism has not disappeared so much as taken on different forms, one of which is a “soft totalitarianism” that functions by way of seduction.

In conclusion, the evidence I present calls for the rejection of Lipovetsky’s ethical claims according to his own criteria. Regardless of whether the final assessment of fashion ultimately turns out to be positive or negative, Lipovetsky’s overall stance appears to depend upon a position of genuine freedom existing within a democratic framework. This is a position that is based in the traditional ethical notion of non-coerced, voluntary choice. What allegedly emerges is a type of hedonistic ethical egoism that puts the preservation of individual liberty above all else. However, what my response demonstrates is that this understanding of commodification is another subtle, if not nefarious, seductive fiction. Thus, my purpose here is to destabilize the conclusion that increased commodification, and commodification as a seductive practice in
particular, has resulted in both greater freedom for individuals and an increased sense of ethical responsibility in society. To the contrary, just as with coercive practices, widespread seductive practices should arouse a strong presumption of wrongdoing, and any ethical theory that fails to critically address their prevalence and potential for unjust domination is lacking a critical element essential for ethical judgment.

To summarize, then, I defend the claim that seduction is just as worthy of ethical consideration as coercion, and any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element by: a) establishing that there is a strong link between ethical concerns and commodification, b) demonstrating that seductive practices, as the dominant mode of commodification, should receive the ethical attention once largely reserved for coercion and, c) presenting a counterargument that further responds to the potential objection that Lipovetsky’s conclusion regarding ethics and totalitarianism poses to my view. I will now begin by considering the link between commodification and ethics while drawing on examples of the comingling of commodification, human life, and the ephemeral world of Hollywood film.

(ii) Fashionable Ethics: Commodification and Ethics Intertwine in Ever-Increasing Ways

Since initially it might not be obvious how commodification and ethics intersect, it will be beneficial to consider how lived experience has been shaped by commodification practices. The fulcrum of the connection hinges on freedom. This can be brought into focus by taking a longitudinal look at how art, media, and images have come to shape much of human existence.

In Adorno’s aesthetic theory, autonomous art presents an opening to the experience of freedom. Yet the art world that Cornell and Lichtenstein inhabited, commodified or otherwise,
represents a very different province from that which photography and cinema would come to occupy in the American imagination. During Adorno’s lifetime (1903-1969) cinema became ubiquitous in Western society, vastly expanding in range and scope. It also began to garner philosophical attention. As Thomas Andrae has well documented, “Horkheimer and Adorno conceived the chapter on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a reply to Benjamin's essay on mechanical reproduction,” in which Walter Benjamin considers film editing and the montage techniques of cinema (Andrae, 1979, pp. 34-37). Whereas Benjamin had professed the revolutionary possibilities offered by the art form, Adorno did not embrace cinema as a potentially transformative power.\(^1\) In response to Benjamin, Adorno claims that, by and large, cinema narrows the aperture through which one can recognize societal tensions and experience freedom. On his view, Hollywood became a vehicle for the culture industry that manipulates the public through overt propaganda, moralizing, sentimentality, and a general tendency toward escapism as opposed to fostering participation in an imminent critique of a meaningful work. However, this does not necessarily imply that all films must be easily dismissed as mindless fodder. To the contrary, I think it would be foolish as well as incorrect to embark down that road, which has been traveled many times in the past. Rather, I believe that Adorno’s views should be contextualized in regard to his demand that autonomous art must contest ideologies and systemic frameworks of domination and commodification.

From the 1940s onward Adorno noted that in cinema, as with other artifacts of culture, what initially appears as subversive or revolutionary all too quickly becomes co-opted by the

\(^1\) See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 1936, for the essay to which Adorno is responding.
economic forces of capitalism acting under the guise of art or entertainment. Today the Golden Age of Hollywood may have long-since passed, but the pervasiveness of film in everyday life has scarcely disappeared so much as ushered in the era of the post-cinematic, which expands cinematic possibilities into the areas of television, video games, interactive media, and more. Commercials, which once stood apart as something obviously distinct from cinematic art, now frequently contain notably filmic elements or vice-versa, widely-released films are ever more commonly linked to product placement and tie-ins to outside advertising and products.

All of this, it seems, is very much in line with what Lipovetsky terms the current “reign of seduction” in society (EF, p.6). Through fashion, writ-large as “the fashionable,” he attests to the virtues of the ephemeral as a democratizing power that distances individuals from interfering with each other yet nonetheless provides access to opportunities for real social change. This allegedly includes promoting ethical standards that are not possible under fascist regimes. Mass populations are united by, and immersed in, a logic of fashion reliant on common fantasies and desires which are exemplified in a broad appeal to and infatuation with certain motion pictures and movie stars as world-wide fascinations (EF, p.181). Actors, as well as musicians and other celebrities:

…are not only foyers of fashion, they are even more figures of fashion themselves as beings-for-seduction, modern quintessences of seduction. Stars are characterized by the unique charm of their appearance, and the star system can be defined as the enchanted fabrication of images of seduction (EF, p.182).

The adulation and imitation of these aestheticized archetypes, whose identities appear to be both familiar and fixed to viewing audiences, work to anesthetize individuals from their traditional...
cultural and familial influences. Building on the research of Edgar Moran, Lipovetsky goes on to assert that this is not merely incidental, but in fact integral, to the ethical comportment of individuals today:

By way of stars and eroticism, sports and women’s magazines, games and variety shows, mass culture has exalted the life of leisure, individual happiness, and well-being; it has promoted a new ethics for living based on play and consumption (EF, p.189).

As a result of being steeped in mass culture, individuals may grow more apathetic toward becoming engaged in traditional political processes and social activism. Yet at the same time, he contends, most will allegedly become more tolerant and open to others as they break away from stronger conformist ties and develop a new subjective autonomy where one’s ethics emerge from such things as popular culture’s exhilarating tales of liberated, self-made heroics and love stories (EF, pp.189-191). The seemingly paradoxical result, Lipovetsky claims, is that even though life is unpredictably subject to the sway of ephemeral imagery and seductive forces, there has nonetheless been a vigorous, renewed interest in ethical issues as evidenced by the amount of discourse surrounding bioethics, business ethics, environmental ethics, and more (EF, p.249).

The conflations of fashion and ethics can be seen in numerous spectacles merging elements of entertainment with calls for ethical action. Soliciting celebrity endorsements or holding high profile fundraisers have become commonplace for correspondingly high profile causes. For example, well-intentioned musician and actor Bob Geldof, who organized a series of recordings, charity concerts, live broadcasts and videos to raise funds for famine relief, claimed to have

\[2\] Here Lipovetsky is challenging the views of thinkers such as Marcuse, Debord, Lazerfeld, and Merton who likened the escapism media provide to an opiate drugging the minds of the masses (EF, 188).
made “famine fashionable” by advancing what Lipovetsky describes as, “…a painless, optional, emotional, and circumstantial ethics, an ethics adapted to the new individualist culture and stripped of regular, maximalist, sacrificial commandments” (EF, p.249). In the realm of politics, similar tactics can be found in examining the close relationship between media and encouraging humanitarian intervention in crises (EF, p.249).

Alternatively, for those less well-intentioned toward others from the start, when nearly everything can be assigned an exchange value the instrumentalization of ethics is accomplished simply by appealing to the individualist mantra of ethical egoism: “ethics pays” (EF, p.249). In other words, actions are based on the belief that ethical behavior will yield beneficial returns in business or personal life, even if only by avoiding the potentially worse consequences of acting unethically.3

The frivolity of fashion notwithstanding, ethics thus becomes another means of communication, “a tool for managing brand names and human beings” (EF, p.250). Counterintuitive as this commodified ethics may initially sound to developing comportment toward the welfare of others, Lipovetsky contends, widespread volunteerism and the recent fervency of ethical debates suggest otherwise. Instead of a swirling decent into selfish irresponsibility, subjective individualism is actually self-limiting, leading both liberal pragmatists and moralistic fundamentalists to rededicate themselves to issues of mutual aid and moral values (EF, p.250).

3 An example of this would be engaging in environmentally sustainable business practices, not because it is considered the right thing to do in principle or because it would bring about the best results for others, but because it would likely be individually profitable, such as by avoiding regulatory fines or by appealing to customers who desire (and/or find it “fashionable”) to purchase environmentally-friendly products.
Yet despite the examples he provides, it seems to me that Lipovetsky’s conception of subjective individualism is commitment to and dependent upon the existence of a position of genuine freedom. That is to say, his argument relies upon not merely the possibility but the high probability that pro-social actions will be undertaken because ethical agency is rooted in a voluntary, highly personalized, “free” choice, even as it is inextricably intertwined with the trappings of fashion, fantasy, novelty, advertising, and other seductive aspects of popular culture. The coercive aspects of commodification, it would seem, have given way to a newfound sense of freedom via the ephemeral seduction of consumer choice. This, I maintain, is what can and should be challenged. Consequently, in addressing this challenge and Lipovetsky’s conflation of ethics and fashion, I will make use of an arguably fashionable television commercial in order to develop a genealogical treatment of cinema as situated in relation to the industrial revolution and demonstrate the continued impact of commodification practices on individual freedom.

a. Seductive Commodification is a Form of Manipulation

Advertising and manipulation are frequently linked together. Although advertising is persuasive in nature, it is not necessarily manipulative. To be manipulative is to be disingenuous, exerting influence over someone else by employing deception, exploitation, or other forms of deceitful tactics in order to achieve a desired result. Thus, there is a strong moral presumption against manipulation prior to any attempts to justify its use in various situations. Moreover, despite the fact that advertisements need not be manipulative, many are by virtue of employing manipulative strategies. Therefore, the strong moral presumption against manipulation is frequently extended to advertising as a reason to be ethically suspect of its communicative form and content. Yet deciding where to draw the line between what constitutes truth in advertising and what crosses over into manipulation can present itself as a challenge at
times, particularly when seductive practices enhance the ethical ambiguity of the advertisement in question.

During the 2011 Super Bowl, the Chrysler Group, LLC debuted a commercial for its “200” model automobile. Filmed on location in Detroit, the advertisement features musician and actor Eminem (Marshall Mathers) as well as images of abandoned buildings and gritty factory scenes juxtaposed against the architectural and cultural gems that are frequently overlooked by media coverage. Closing with a clever turn of phrase, “Imported from Detroit,” the ad was instantly popular.

Reassuring viewers that Detroit is still “The Motor City” emphasizes a motif that repeatedly plays out in the cinematic mythology of the automobile and the American city. I will examine how Detroit is often used to illustrate a dystopian terror amidst the promise of technology that taps into collective fears of the American Dream gone awry. It is also not lacking in its sublime qualities. Detroit’s beleaguered environment has emerged as a playground for vandals and street artists alike and, consequently, more artists and documentary filmmakers began flocking to the city. Supporters applaud the capturing of the harsh realities and metaphoric beauty of decay, while detractors often dismiss the work as exploitative and misinformed. This ongoing tension, significant in that it is present in one of the most popular advertisements in years, assists in illustrating a greater level of complexity than what Lipovetsky seems to suggest is operating in the allegedly democratizing and less-than-systematic industry of commercial advertising. Moreover, assessing the commercial in this genealogical manner will also aid in overcoming Lipovetsky’s assertions that the end result of a seductive fashion culture is a break from traditional values that increases tolerance for diversity.
b. *The Pervasiveness of Commodification: Terror, Manipulation, and the Cinematic*  

*Mythology of the Motor City*

Chrysler’s “Born of Fire” advertising campaign seemed as intent on selling the city of Detroit as it did automobiles. Although Chrysler refused to divulge the exact cost of the commercial, CEO Sergio Marchionne offered a vague estimation of, “less than $9 million” (*New York Times*, 2011). It was a high profile gamble for a company that was already in the news for receiving over $10 billion in U.S. and Canadian government bailout loans two years earlier. Yet despite generating a fair amount of criticism, the positive response to the advertisement seems to have overwhelmingly outweighed the backlash. It generated a tremendous amount of activity on social media outlets and logged over ten million viewings on YouTube.com.\(^4\) A week after its initial airing, consumer interest in the Chrysler 200 continued to register a 463% increase on the automobile sales hub Edmunds.com, which Michelle Krebs credited to the fact that, unlike many Super Bowl ads:

…Chrysler's message seems to have resonated with viewers far beyond that first wave of buzz. While consideration for the other automotive advertisers has fallen back to earth, Chrysler is still getting much more attention now than just two or three weeks ago (Edmunds.com, 2011).

In sharp contrast to 2010’s first quarter loss of $197 million, three months into 2011 Chrysler reported a $116 million profit (Wayland, 2012). What was “Chrysler's message” and why did it

\(^4\) As Richard Burr reported: “For the doubting Thomases, the Associated Press reports that the Chrysler ad starring Eminem was ‘the big story of the (Super Bowl) night,’” according to NM Incite, a Nielsen/McKinsey Company that tracks online buzz. *The Detroit News* online, accessed February 7, 2011 at 2:07 PM.
have such an impact, particularly on those outside of Detroit? Examining the commercial’s content can help elucidate how the city functions as a metaphoric backdrop for attitudes regarding terror and the struggles for individual freedom as well as a sense of collective identity in the United States.

The advertisement begins with roadside scenes of urban devastation. A jittery camera pans across the hazy, polluted skyline. Jump cuts of smokestacks, cranes, and a vacant building proceed at a rapid pace. Interstate signs and a long shot of an American flag behind a desolate stretch of chain-link fence establish the city’s sprawling, arterial highways while an unseen narrator asks questions such as, “What could a town that’s been to hell and back know about the finer things in life?” (BOF) The answer, viewers are informed against portentous incidental music, is “more than most” (BOF).

Allegedly, out of this apparent hell the hard-earned fruits of labor emerge from the “hottest fires” (BOF). Iconic images blend into one another. The twenty-four foot long, suspended bronze “Fist of a Champion” memorial to auto worker-turned-prizefighter Joe Louis transitions into close-ups of Diego Rivera’s “Detroit Industry” fresco, its figures of assembly line workers frozen in suspended animation. That Rivera’s mural, as much a socioeconomic critique and homage to proletarian solidarity as it is a tribute to labor and technology, has been appropriated for use in selling cars passes by with an apparent lack of irony. This is a telling of “our story,” the narrator urges, and even on a winter’s day the gilded brass rays and outstretched hands of Marshall Fredericks’s promethean statue “Spirit of Detroit” shimmer with possibility (BOF).

This story, the narrator continues, is “probably not the one you’ve been reading in the papers” (BOF). Few places have been as pervasively maligned as Detroit. Media consistently
emphasize a crumbling city marked by crime, grime, and the vacancies of a residential exodus from downtown into outlying suburbs that often look post-apocalyptic in appearance themselves. A common perception, especially for outsiders, is that it is not a place to be after dark.

The music changes. While his semi-autobiographical, fight-for-survival anthem “Lose Yourself” plays, recording artist and local celebrity Eminem navigates the plush “200” vehicle through the city. The lesser-known Detroit comes into focus with shots of upscale houses, joggers, well-dressed shoppers along the riverfront, and skaters enjoying an outdoor ice rink. The viewer is reminded that Detroit is an American city. Admittedly, it would not be mistaken for New York, Chicago, or Las Vegas (BOF). Moreover, referencing its incongruity to the Wizard of Oz’s Technicolor utopia the narrator intones, “we’re certainly no one’s Emerald City” (BOF). Nonetheless, there is something irreducibly distinct and valuable about Detroit. Luxury, viewers are informed, stems directly from the dedicated labor of hard-working citizens who have endured more than their fair share of strife.

The production value of the footage gradually improves as the commercial progresses. Viewers are shown crisp, clean filmic images of the automobile and Detroit’s illuminated treasures are reflected in its curves: art deco buildings, the historic Greektown neighborhood, and

5 The Academy Award winning song “Lose Yourself,” penned by Eminem (Marshall Mathers) and collaborator Jess Bass, expresses key plot elements as well as the lead character’s point of view in the film, “8 Mile.” The lyrics reflect the trials and tribulations of a young rap artist continuously striving for success while facing the threat of failure and what that would mean for his otherwise limited future prospects. The scenarios described in the song bear a strong resemblance to Eminem’s biographical information and his early attempts to break into the music industry.
the illustrious Fox Theatre complete with a “Keep Detroit Beautiful” marquee and a choir breaking into an angelic crescendo. It is all made possible, apparently, by the automobile industry. “This is the Motor City,” Eminem states matter-of-factly, pointing directly into the camera, “and this is what we do” (BOF). Barely skipping a beat, the driving rhythm returns, the Chrysler logo reappears, and the commercial fades to black, but not before imparting the memorable tagline, “Imported from Detroit” (BOF).

Technical artistry notwithstanding, with no shortage of clichés and obvious rhetorical devices, one might wonder why this commercial attracted so much attention, much less affinity. Despite its seductive allure in promoting the value of “luxury” and the positive attributes of Detroit as a means to contradicting the reports, “written by people who’ve never even been here,” the advertisement’s metropolitan makeover is not completely believable either (BOF). Yet it is precisely this unresolved dialectic tension between what I will term “the two Detroits” that is key to its effectiveness. On one hand, there is a great deal of nostalgia for Detroit as it was perceived to be during the height of the American automotive industry’s success. According to Lipovetsky:

The more democracies commit themselves to the race for the new, the more they are fascinated with the past, and the more interest they show in rehabilitating, conserving, and valorizing what is old (EF, p.248).

If this is the case, then the question of what remains possible for the future becomes yoked to a notion of recovering the past.

On the other hand, there is also a sense of terror over what Detroit became in the wake of that industry’s decline. It is a terror that, particularly when viewed as a future-oriented threat that
could spread to the rest of the nation, makes embracing the nostalgic all the more tempting. By examining this tension more closely I will show how the promotion of terror and nostalgia can become a manipulative tool working against rationality. This will illustrate how the cinematic medium exemplifies the paradigm shift from coercion to seduction that I maintain has taken place, but has not in fact led to the increased tolerance and pluralism that Lipovetsky concludes that it has.

c. Manipulation is a Key Factor in Totalitarianism

Totalitarianism can refer strictly to political regimes that hold strict authority over a group of subjects, often through the use of fear and force. Or totalitarianism can be defined somewhat more broadly as any institution or system which attempts to exert ideological or physical control over a wide range of aspects within public and private life. The physical or psychological manipulation of human bodies is typically pivotal to achieving, as well as sustaining, totalitarian systems in either case. Yet manipulation can be surprisingly subtle at times, as in the case of carefully orchestrated propaganda. When left critically unexamined, what initially appears well-grounded and rational runs the risk of reversal. Given the narratives of terror and nostalgia in the oft-perpetuated cultural mythologies of Detroit, they seem particularly well-suited to probing the role of manipulation in this complex ethical landscape further.

Due in no small part to films and other media, the city of Detroit has long captured the world’s collective imagination. Although Hollywood’s treatment of the city has often been far from kind, its reputation for producing exceptional musical talent has proven to be more favorable. In the early 1960s former auto-worker Berry Gordy Jr.’s Hitsville USA recording studio began churning out popular hits like they were made on an assembly line. These songs
dominated the music sales charts with soulful, backbeat-driven, radio friendly arrangements. The so-called “Motown sound” soon became synonymous with the “Motor City” itself. Long after its heyday, the Motown Record Corporation remained a touchstone for working class authenticity in the music world.\textsuperscript{6} A steady stream of critically acclaimed musicians in every genre continued to find inspiration or otherwise benefit from Motown’s legacy of credibility. Having grown up mainly in Detroit, Eminem emerged as another multi-platinum selling artist joining this impressive heritage. He then parlayed his music industry success into an acting career by starring in \textit{8 Mile} (2002), a big-budget film based loosely on his life.

Still, for a company hoping to rejuvenate its image, Chrysler’s decision to employ Eminem in branding a luxury automobile is a curious move. Gordy’s Motown acts were purposely marketed as clean-cut, well-choreographed goodwill ambassadors of the city.\textsuperscript{7} Eminem represents the antithesis of this ideal. He had achieved notoriety as a rap musician who drew outrage from various social groups contending that his lyrics contained a veritable laundry list of objectionable material such as: obscenity, misogyny, homophobia, drug use, and graphic accounts of domestic violence. His highly publicized life off-stage included battles with chemical dependency, celebrity feuds, arrests for assault, probation on weapons charges, and

\textsuperscript{6} Even though the company no longer reports sales anywhere near to what they were in past decades as of 2014 the Motown Record Corporation was still in operation, producing new artists and continuing to sell from its back catalog.

\textsuperscript{7} For a discussion of how Motown musicians were, “cautioned by Gordy that they were representing ‘not only Motown records but all of Detroit,’” see Craig Hansen Werner’s \textit{A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America}. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006, p.21.
being named as the defendant in a slander suit filed by his mother. In the advertising game, where appearance is everything, one might hardly expect him to be selected to sell midsize sedans to middle America.

However, Eminem’s uncanny ability to reposition himself as a hometown hero, concerned citizen, and caring father who, despite repeated setbacks, rises like a phoenix from the ashes of his own destruction renders him the perfect protagonist for the tale of “Two Detroits.” In post-9/11 America, Detroit had become a powerful symbol of terror and contemporary dystopia. Inducing nostalgia for not only Detroit’s but also the nation’s past industrial preeminence, Detroit’s present state is largely perceived by much of America as a future to be avoided. Eminem’s identification with the struggling city elicited both empathy and admiration from a broad population that was adjusting to difficult economic times, replete with fears of a continued decline in quality of life. By choosing to reside there even at the height of his fame, Eminem’s public persona became increasingly associated with the city itself, in all of its conflicted beauty and horror.⁸

Indeed, Detroit was once a Modernist wonderland that essentially collapsed upon itself yet somehow continues to function in a post-modern world. If attractiveness and the ephemeral are the hallmarks of fashion, then the decline of Detroit appears to stand as a painful reminder that all of the shared popular culture desires in the world cannot change the stark reality of tough times. Although I cannot speak for Lipovetsky, based on his writings it would seem that he would view the struggling city as an exception to an otherwise functioning order; its ills

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⁸ For example, as the perennial “comeback kid,” Eminem’s album “Relapse” (2009) was followed by “Recovery” (2010).
attributable to ongoing inequities in an imperfect capitalist system, but by no means a totalitarian state.\footnote{With regard to exceptions to the logic of fashion, Lipovetsky states that, “Economic spirals, the escalation in war technology, terrorist attacks, nuclear catastrophes, unemployment, the distribution of labor, xenophobia—widely disparate phenomena such as these lie at the opposite pole from a frivolous image of our time. The euphoria of fashion is certainly not omnipresent: the age of seduction coexists with the arms race, with lack of personal security in daily life, with the economic crisis and the subjective crisis. The fashion form… can sometimes rearticulate them, but it does not absorb them entirely into its own logic. My aim in this book is not to homogenize disparate entities, but to grasp a dominant historical tendency that is restructuring entire areas of our collective universe” (EF, p.132).} In the strictest sense of totalitarianism as limitless power in the hands of the state, this would be correct.

However, on closer examination it can be shown that many of the issues exemplified by the case of Detroit are not exceptions to the rules of an otherwise dominate logic that somehow fails to subsume them, so much as the dystopic products of totalizing, instrumentalized mechanisms interwoven with commodification. I will now present a genealogical consideration of Detroit and the cinema that traces the roots of works preceding the “Born of Fire” commercial and that will demonstrate how they at the very least point toward a soft-totalitarianism of dystopic forces at work.

d. Pervasive Commodification Can Function as a Totalitarian Force

Totalitarianism is a hallmark of dystopias. Typically, dystopias are presented as administered societies in which life, frequently dis-individualized and dehumanized by technology, is dominated by repressive, authoritarian forces serving a misguided ideology and/or
the interests of a select few at the expense of the masses. In addition to contending with threats and intimidation, those caught within a dystopia must carve out an existence among poverty, resource scarcity, violence, crime, disease, and environmental degradation. In the case of Detroit, the seeds of dystopia were sown in the early twentieth century by the promotion of the city as a modern utopia. Henry Ford’s implementation of standardized, assembly line technology made the mass production of the “Model T” automobile both possible and affordable. Ford Motor Company soon unveiled an unprecedented, large-scale publicity effort to sell the concept of recreational car ownership (Hounshell, 1985, pp.274-280). By the mid-1920s drivers were taking to the roadways like never before. As exponential industry growth continued well into the 1950s, America had clearly become “a car culture” (Barry, 1988, p.73). The term “Fordism” became associated with the linkage of high worker wages and the consumption of low-cost goods. The success of Ford and other automobile companies headquartered in Detroit turned the city into a locus of industry that spawned a great migration of laborers seeking employment opportunities. The city thrived economically, its population swelled, and Detroit was often touted as the epicenter for achieving the proverbial American Dream of freedom and prosperity.

However, even in its early stages, not everyone remained uncritical of Fordism. Marxist scholars and members of the Frankfurt School were among the most vociferous to note that Ford’s ethos seemed to create a system in which workers’ wages increased mainly in proportion to the amount of goods they produced and then purchased, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle of hyper-consumerism and alienated, corporate servitude. Similar concerns were raised allegorically in Aldous Huxley’s novel *Brave New World* (1932), in which a futuristic, quintessentially dystopian London is depicted as having replaced Christianity by deifying Ford.
In the age of mass production, delineated with the initials “AF” for “After Ford,” the tops of crosses are removed to reflect the “T” of the Model T Ford while workers are drugged and indoctrinated into worshipping their new symbolic god (Huxley, 1932).

Reflecting on the relationship between production processes and private life, Adorno describes the demands of industrialized society as cultivating a widespread, fear-induced paranoia:

The haste, nervousness, restlessness observed since the rise of the big cities is now spreading in the manner of an epidemic, as did once the plague and cholera… Everybody must have projects all the time. The maximum must be extracted from leisure (MM, p.138).

The distinction between a life in which one works to live and one lives to work was becoming increasingly blurred.

Very much at issue here is the notion, developed by Adorno and Horkheimer, that the overwhelmingly progressive narrative of technological development and economic growth belies the ways in which human life becomes subjugated to the demands of industrialization (DE, p.13). As previously discussed in Chapter One, they argue that with the valorization of mass production came an increased tendency to treat human activities (or even humans themselves) as commodities, relatively substitutable and valuable only if they contribute to the attainment of instrumental goals (DE, pp.72-73).

This relationship between industrialization and commodification received cinematic attention in Charlie Chaplin’s Modern Times (1936) which depicts an individual fighting to survive the dire economic conditions of the Great Depression era. Chaplin had visited Detroit
area factories and witnessed firsthand the hectic life of laborers who often had to forego restroom and lunch breaks in order to meet their production quotas (Hounshell, 1985, pp.319-20). Chaplin drew upon these experiences and, as Kenneth Schuyler Lynn observes, the film’s, “immense factory… could have been plucked from a documentary on Detroit” (p.371).

Onscreen the Little Tramp is an assembly line worker who endures such stressors as a newly developed technological breakthrough, the force-feeding machine, as well as a maddeningly fast conveyor belt. In one legendary scene, while attempting to fix an enormous machine the Tramp’s entire body is pulled into its gears. He is thus shown to be, both literally and figuratively, a cog in the machine.

With *Modern Times*, Adorno would have likely been suspicious of the film’s comedic character and the comfortable ease with which the audience laughed at its thematic imagery. As previously mentioned, for Adorno it is theoretically possible for art, by virtue of its autonomy from traditional systems of production and exchange, to reveal hidden or overlooked societal contradictions and forms of suffering (AT, pp. 368-369). Yet by being mass-marketed as never before, art has fallen prey to the same logic of production and consumption that plagued other aspects of existence. With rare exception, instead of remaining independent from society, art is now part of the omnipresent Culture Industry aimed at generating profits while reinforcing the status quo of its own values and aims (DE, p.136). In addition, one of the Culture Industry’s biggest offenders is the profit-driven Hollywood studio system (DE, p.140). He believed that Hollywood keeps the public passively distracted from greater concerns, and also serves to support prevailing ideologies. Still, in hindsight and without Adorno’s approval, comedic films such as *Modern Times* can be appreciated for how insightful they were in regard to societal inequalities, human despair, and oppressive forces of domination.
Creative works such as *Modern Times* and *Brave New World* make for potent criticism on commodification and the human condition in industrialized society. They also lend credence to the assertion that, contrary to Lipovetsky’s claims, thinkers such as Adorno were not simply making unwarranted, dire predictions about a future that would never materialize. To the contrary, at the time they were produced these works provided cultural commentary on already existing circumstances. They also speculated on the further negative consequences of what could happen if production and commodification continued to expand unfettered from critical reflection. Rather than definitively concluding that Adorno and similar thinkers were wrong, it is just as likely that some changes toward a post-industrial society were in fact brought about by this recognition.

Moreover, in many instances where production and commodification do appear to continue to grow unchecked, the results still point to a reversal in the initial positive aims of instrumental reason. For example, although Adorno might not be exempt from criticism on his assertions regarding Hollywood, his concern over the unbridled consumerism it often fueled was not entirely misguided. For decades there were markedly fewer films challenging Fordist industrialism coming out of the studio system in comparison to how many there were promoting its virtues, especially in regard to automobiles. Cars were significant Hollywood fixtures, frequently publicized as symbols of wealth and status or idealized through such motifs as the “freedom of the open road.” Although Detroit garnered negative attention from time to time, and indeed it received quite a bit in conjunction with the civil riots of 1943 and 1967, the news media often glossed over the underlying details of how the factory system fostered the racism and
segregation that motivated these occurrences. Meanwhile, as 1970 approached, the mass commercial and residential evacuation from downtown had already begun.

That was the beginning of the decade in which everything would change for Detroit. In 1973 as well as 1979 political and economic conflicts with Middle East oil suppliers sent gasoline prices skyrocketing. Detroit’s “Big Three” automakers, already suffering from ineffective management, lack of innovation, and quality concerns, were unprepared to meet the demand for smaller, more fuel-efficient vehicles (Berger, 2001, pp.70-71). As Japanese manufacturers flooded the market with compact cars, the threat of foreign competition generated rhetoric indicting the allegedly aggressive, colonizing practices of the pejoratively termed, “Japanese invasion” (Berger, 2001, p.70). Detroit, depicted as an American city under economic siege, was fighting to save its once flourishing existence, and it was losing badly.

It seems as though Adorno’s societal concerns were being manifested, as years of prioritizing the instrumental goals of industry had indeed come at the expense of rationality. Negative externalities such as environmental degradation, urban sprawl, and inadequate public

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11 Detroit’s “Big Three” referred to the following companies: Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors. Although the generalizations described here are accurate to a strongly proven degree, the benefit of hindsight years later has allowed analysts to uncover more nuanced data on the reasons behind the American automotive industry’s crisis. Still, these components did play a large role in the actual cause as well as the perceived cause of the decline in sales of U.S. manufactured vehicles. See Michael L. Berger for a discussion of the literature of the time in relation to later research.
housing, which had been repeatedly ignored during times of prosperity, became major news sources when Detroit’s previous infrastructure became unsustainable. From the 1980s well into the twenty-first century, Hollywood continually reinforced this dystopian vision by presenting Detroit as a crime-ridden, hub of corruption in numerous films.\textsuperscript{12} Although other cities also received negative treatment, Detroit is comparatively lacking in contrapuntal positive representation.\textsuperscript{13} More often than not, if these films had a happy ending then it somehow involved an escape from Detroit. This tension between the real and the ephemeral that plays out in the dystopian exemplification of Detroit, which has been shown to include the commodification of human labor, cannot be easily resolved or simply written off as merely a convenient fiction of a coercive culture industry wishing to profit financially from its image. Rather, as I will illustrate in the section that follows, as commodification became more

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\textsuperscript{12} These films included, but are not limited to: \textit{Robocop, True Romance, Gross Pointe Blank, Miami Cops, Beverly Hills Cop, Hoffa, The Island, The Man, Four Brothers, Gran Torino, Gridlock'd, Out of Sight, The Rosemary Murders, Evil Dead, Exit Wounds, and Presumed Innocent}. Television shows were somewhat mixed on this account, ranging from the wholesome, family-in-suburbia style sit-coms “Home Improvement” and “Sister Sister,” to the somewhat edgier depiction of suburban teens of “Freaks and Geeks,” and the stop-motion animated comedy, “The PJs,” which satirically depicted life in the Brewster-Douglass Housing Projects. “Detroit 1-8-7,” a short-lived crime drama, was also filmed in and around Detroit.

\textsuperscript{13} Philip Railsback’s \textit{Flash of Genius} is a variation from the norm in that it is set in the Detroit area in the glory days of the 1950s. Yet even this film demonstrates white collar corruption by telling the true story of inventor Robert Kearns who fights an uphill legal battle after Chrysler and Ford Motor Company allegedly violated his patent rights for the intermittent windshield wiper.
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pervasive, it still employed ethically suspect manners of manipulation and soft-totalitarianism, but through practices that are markedly more seductive than overtly coercive.

e. Seductive Practices are as Worthy of Consideration as Coercive Practices

By the time 8 Mile arrived in theaters, the image of Detroit as a specter of terror was deeply solidified in much of the American mindset. Although the previous year’s 9-11 World Trade Center bombings had a chilling effect across the nation, the social impact of the attacks disproportionately affected the large population of Arab Americans living in the vicinity of Detroit.14 As Sally Howell and Andrew Shryock contend, Detroit served as the perfect setting for the “powerful motif” of the collapse of history, and virtually overnight Arab Americans found themselves excluded from the mainstream framework of citizenry:

Suddenly, it was a scene of threat, “divided loyalties," and potential backlash. In the suburb of Dearborn, home to 30,000 Arab Americans, people began, after 9/11, to describe their neighborhoods as "ghettoes" and "enclaves," a terminology of Otherness… (Howell and Shryock, 2003, p.2).

Dearborn became the first American city to open an Office of Homeland Security, Howell and

14 I am using their term, “Arab-Americans” and take it to denote United States residents (whether having been born in or immigrated to the U.S.) who self-identify as having ethnic, sociocultural, linguistic or other heritage or identity tied to a variety of countries commonly referred to as the Arab world. It is employed here as an umbrella category that is not meant to overlook the rich diversity within communities including but not limited to the influences of the varied ethnicities of origin or ancestry or the experiences that continue to structure diverse identities.
Shryock note, and formerly common practices of transnational travel and monetary exchange became highly scrutinized activities. By exacerbating widespread, pre-existing terror over jobs outsourced to other countries, moreover, one need not actually reside in Detroit to be affected by these reinvigorated, all too familiar fears of the foreign as a threat to the American way of life.

*8 Mile* epitomizes the nostalgia-versus-terror tension of the Two Detroits by depicting the city as a place both foreign and domestic, infused with fear but holding out hope for escape and redemption. The title refers to 8 Mile Road, a real roadway which has long been viewed as a dividing line between the poorer, predominantly Black neighborhoods to the south and the more affluent, predominantly White suburbs to the north. In the film, life is hard, relationships are chaotic, and the cars are in disrepair. Since factory work no longer seems to provide adequate wages for new vehicles, rides must be shared. Eminem’s character (“B-Rabbit”) functions as a troubled yet surprisingly relatable anti-hero who endeavors to survive his inhospitable surroundings. His personal demons seem to be as much a product of his environment as his own choices. Every downfall appears harsh but short-lived, as though he is always on the verge of a comeback. Music provides his primary outlet and singular hope for the future. The theme song “Lose Yourself” recounts his struggles and overwhelming desire to move out of an overcrowded trailer park, perhaps the ultimate symbol of the automotive industry’s collapse: the mobile home that lacks all mobility. Ultimately, the film extols the triumph of the individual over adversity, with Eminem’s *roman a clef* character as the embodiment of Detroit itself, and the collective fate of the American audience symbolically tied to the outcome.

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15 It should also be noted that in 1940 a wall (still standing as of 2014) was erected off of 8 Mile in order to separate predominantly African-American neighborhoods from a more affluent, federally funded Caucasian housing development. It has sometimes been referred to as Detroit’s mini-Berlin Wall.
Whereas Chaplin’s Little Tramp once warned against the alienating and
dehumanizing effects of life in industrialized society, Eminem’s B-Rabbit surfaces as its
surprising hope for revival. Given the optimistic ending of the film and Eminem’s firmly
entrenched public identity as a star, it becomes all the more clear as to why he was chosen for
Chrysler’s “Born of Fire” commercial. Chrysler might still be producing cars more or less in
accordance with the old-fashioned assembly line model of production, but it must now adjust to a
world in which seduction functions in a new and pervasive way. Having the product sell itself
on its own merits or even through attempts to seduce consumers with simple appeals to flash and
style are not as successful as they once were. As Lipovetsky states:

It is no longer a question of checking off anonymous performances and flatly objective
qualities, but of communicating a “brand-name personality.” Seduction through
advertising has shifted to a new register; seduction is henceforth invested in a personal
look (EF, 158).

All controversy aside, Eminem functions as a solid, fixed personification of a relatable,
“underdog-makes-good even in the face of terror” character who should be listened to and
respected.

Furthermore, Eminem’s identification with Detroit and Detroit’s figurative place as a city
in America’s heartland both serve as powerful symbolics that sell concepts, which subsequently
create a demand for certain kinds of products. After all, if the city is inextricably linked to the
automobile industry, as Chrysler’s commercial would suggest, then their recommendation for
overcoming terror seems obvious: embrace nostalgia and buy more cars. Detroit’s return to glory
is a matter of patriotism; peace and prosperity will follow.
Americans are being persuaded to uncritically increase consumption, particularly by purchasing “luxury” vehicles, in order to return to an idealized time that never actually existed. Is there any harm in this? With high unemployment and plummeting real estate values, there is no denying that Detroit needs economic rejuvenation. As is typically the case in instances of seduction, few people are likely to believe that such goals will be fully realizable yet those who do choose to purchase a vehicle make their decisions voluntarily and free from undue influence or coercion. Still, it seems highly questionable, perhaps even deceptive, to purport that the best possible course of action would be to follow the same path that led to the current conditions. Fordism and the “car culture” did not exactly usher in utopian freedom, but they did create many of the pressures that now threaten much of the natural environment. Furthermore, even when masked by prevailing financial interests, human injustice has seemingly always co-existed with prosperity, so an influx of economic capital is hardly a guaranteed panacea for reducing social inequalities, oppression, or suffering.

Nonetheless, if following Lipovetsky, such examples of the intertwining of life, cinema, and advertisement should create, at best, a positive desire to emulate the affluent and maintain order rather than to incite violent action in an attempt to overthrow those who currently possess it. At worst, the adverse outcomes are likely to be temporary and fleeting. Although side-effects such as depression or internal conflict can and frequently do arise from long-term exposure to the unfulfilled, materialistic desires of fashion, the notion of existential anguish is not new. There is no grand plot to manipulate the masses according to a totalitarian agenda or fascist regime. For good or ill, it is only a commercial that is of no great consequence. Or is it really as simple as Lipovetsky might lead us to believe?

Rather than weighing in on the direct harm, or lack thereof, caused by this individual
commercial, I propose that Lipovetsky’s claims be reconsidered with regard to their underlying assumptions and the role that fear plays in encouraging action. Through my genealogical consideration of the cinematic mythology of Detroit, what I have attempted to show thus far is that the “Born of Fire” commercial did not simply materialize out of thin air. Lipovetsky claims that the dominance of fashion, regardless of whether clothes or cars are at issue, has broken down the traditional stratification of class barriers. To a limited degree, he has a point. However, in exercising the tools of seduction, the commercial does not rely solely upon a rejection of otherness in the abstract, but instead banks rather heavily on the denunciation of all that is alien to traditional, “blue-collar,” working class values. Yet inexplicably, through the power of consumption, by the end of the commercial these “blue collar” references are mysteriously transformed so that they instead validate and serve the “white collar” class values of leisure and luxury. It seems that hard work on the assembly line is what makes such things possible but, hearkening back to *Modern Times*, it is not at all clear exactly how or for whom. This turn toward, not simply consumption, but excessive hyperconsumerism is summarily accepted as an unavoidable attribute of our time.

Also in the commercial Eminem, as the human locus of the “Two Detachots,” simultaneously functions as both a mythic, heroic figure and as a self-reliant every-person navigating the ruins of industrial collapse. Even if governmental totalitarianism isn’t directly in play in this case, the extent of corporate control and influence remains an issue, as is the relationship between commerce, corporations, and the state, particularly during dire times for so many residents and businesses. In “Born of Fire” Chrysler utilizes Detroit as a dystopic trope eliciting the longstanding but reinvigorated anxieties and uncertainties of a nation in a period of economic turmoil. The subtext is clear: if Detroit can be rescued, then American prosperity will
endure.

Oddly, however, even as the advertising campaign evokes fears of the foreign and purposely appeals to American patriotism, negotiations were already underway for a foreign firm’s purchase of a majority stake in Chrysler from the holdings of the U.S. government, and by July 2011 the Italian firm Fiat owned a 53.2% controlling interest in the company (Bunkley, 2001). In that same year, Sergio Marchionne began publicly defending the company against accusations of proposed plans to outsource production to China by reassuring Americans that no domestic jobs would be lost, even though establishing a separate Chinese presence would most likely be necessary in order to become competitive in local markets there (Walsh, 2011). That is, Marchionne claimed that American jobs would not be “moved” to China but rather, the production of uniquely Chinese Jeeps in China would, “help bolster the Jeep brand, and solidify the resilience of U.S. jobs” (Marchionne, 2012). Ostensibly, the real threat was not from creating jobs elsewhere; it came from complacency at home. As reported by Tom Walsh, Marchionne’s message seemed to focus less on presenting overseas opportunities than it did on curtailing the costs of U.S. workers’ wages and benefits, even amidst Chrysler’s much-hailed economic comeback:

16 Marchionne was employed as CEO of both Chrysler and Fiat at the time.

17 Despite producing Jeeps in China, preserving the notion of a distinctly American Jeep as something that would remain iconic and unspoiled by globalization seemed important to Chrysler’s strategy here, as Marchionne continues: “Jeep is one of our truly global brands with uniquely American roots. This will never change. So much so that we committed that the iconic Wrangler nameplate, currently produced in our Toledo, Ohio plant, will never see full production outside the United States” (2012).
“The day of reckoning is inevitably coming,” he said... “We cannot afford to be unprepared for the ascent of China, reassuring ourselves of our invincibility… Rather, we need to work to make our industrial base more competitive…” Even assuming China was to export, "only 10% of what it produces …the risk we face in our home markets is enormous” (Marchionne, 2011).

Marchionne’s emphatic word choices seem to have a familiar ring: the imminent threat of the foreign Other. And yet, by early 2013 Fiat’s stake in the company increased to 58.5% and plans were announced that Chrysler would be partnering with Guangzhou Automobile Group to manufacture a minimum of 100,000 Jeep vehicles in China beginning in 2014 (Jewkes and Rebaudo, 2013). Thus, Chrysler continued to benefit financially from marketing appeals to American patriotism and a national sense of pride, while simultaneously expanding operations as a multinational, limited liability company. Although the rebounding profits and globalization initiatives undoubtedly pay off for some, for others the promise of rejuvenation in “Born of Fire” is very much restricted by an alleged need for lowered expectations with regard to wages and benefits, and the perpetual fear that the existing jobs could disappear as quickly as they returned. If at all possible, a return to Detroit’s halcyon days seems at best in the distant future and even as the “Born of Fire” campaign suggests that the act of indulging in luxury and leisure by purchasing a “200” automobile is both patriotic and morally praiseworthy, the message to the American laborers who build them remains: if one has a job, any job, then one should be exceedingly grateful.

In sum, Lipovetsky’s interpretation of the implications of increased commodification and seduction speaks to a less exclusive, more egalitarian society that is not rooted in either dutiful collective action or self-sacrifice, but in the affirmation of individualism and the inconsequential
ephemeral. Even though Lipovetsky contends that the logic of fashion cannot be applied to all situations, it nevertheless seems as though most of the hallmarks of it are evident in the case of Detroit, with the exclusion of his predicted, self-limiting ethical concern. For as this genealogical analysis has illustrated, although the dynamics are different, the distribution of power has changed relatively little since the production-consumption model has shifted from the Hobson’s choice era of the Model T Ford to one in which personal preference is said to trump all. Domination and oppression remain, as does very real suffering. Widespread commodification practices still warrant ethical concern and, having undergone a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction, it follows that today’s seduction is just as worthy of ethical consideration as coercive forces ever were.

(iii) Totalitarianism is Not on the Decline, it Just Appears in Different Forms

a. Challenges to Lipovetsky

Despite Lipovetsky’s careful attempts to temper his claims from presenting an overly-optimistic or exultant depiction of the complex times we live in, it seems to me that there is more at work here than just the ebbs and flows of a flawed, but otherwise desirable-- at least to the extent that no better alternative can be found-- democratic system that is deeply entrenched in consumerist culture. As I will elaborate on further, with various instances of lives and livelihoods left in the balance, for extended periods of time and without much likelihood of change, embodied freedom in Lipovetsky’s sense appears to be every bit as in jeopardy to totalitarian forces, if not more so, than before.

In addition, I believe that a further challenge for Lipovetsky to overcome is that he lacks a clear argument for how interpersonal unease and injustice is to be addressed as well as an
explanation for what motivates, much less determines, ethical action. It seems that on his view a type of overarching, collective ethical egoism emerges, not from a positive democratic process so much as via either a) an orchestrated, “fashionable” campaign that is often reliant on the transaction of a kind of “feel good” self-satisfaction gained in exchange for aiding others or b) spontaneously, from the combined negative practices of individual disinterest and inaction.18 Neither seems entirely satisfactory for motivating principled ethical actions in individuals. Indeed, Lipovetsky contends that today most individual subjects feel no real sense of obligation or duty and live in relative comfort such that, as Jean-Jacques Thomas explains:

…the fascination with ethics should be linked to a loss of courage and abhorrence of pain induced by the self-proclaimed right to jouissance. Today’s ethics is the new non-coercive society that does not seek anything from anyone and places ethical rules at its core; in this way everyone is protected without having to make any individual effort.

18 As to the former, I do not wish to open the door here to a lengthy debate on whether or not this is unethical in and of itself. I acknowledge the existence of arguments, even in ethical systems which are dependent upon appeals to moral obligation and self-sacrifice, that the possibility of deriving individual happiness is not necessarily excluded. Rather, what I aim to get at is the promotion of allegedly ethical acts primarily as a direct exchange, where the promotion of happiness, self-satisfaction and so forth appear to be directly linked to participation in “fashionable” spectacles or similar actions of which there at times is little consideration as to their actual effectiveness (i.e., “I’m walking to cure X” campaigns), or reflection on whether or not they are unintentionally causing harm at the same time (i.e., “I’m on a mission to help people in the faraway country of X” sponsored tours). Although such things can yield positive results, when involvement is actively marketed as “feel good” events or morally praiseworthy tourism activities, I believe it raises a red flag that these kinds of activities should be more closely scrutinized than they sometimes are.
The burden of individual protection is transferred to an ever-increasing ‘state police apparatus’ (Thomas, 2007, p.597). 19

The pursuit of happiness reigns supreme, and ethics as well as the law are adjusted accordingly on demand.

From Lipovetsky’s standpoint, this tendency of individuals to pursue happiness while simultaneously relying on a growing, seemingly detached police state to protect and defend them does not seem to be recognized as a form of totalitarianism, or at least not one that is worthy of much concern. For although he admits that this new post-modern democratic system hasn’t entirely lived up to its potential, barring the occasional threat from disciplined extremists whose values clash with the hedonistic goals and perceived individual rights of others, the mere inclusion of previously underrepresented voices and a dedication to personal liberty found in a logic of fashion are allegedly so anti-authoritarian in and of themselves that it all but ensures a reduction in conflict and social strife (Thomas, 2007, p.597). That is, whereas some change is inevitable, enforceable rules are set primarily so that one is prohibited from harming others through one’s actions, and these continuously updated rules favor the protection of individualism above all, thereby increasing pluralistic indifference and tolerance by default. 20

Relieved of any

19 See Lipovetsky’s *Le Crépuscule du Devoir (The Twilight of Duty)*, Paris: Gallimard Press, 1992, for the discussion on ethics and power that Thomas refers to here as being an elaboration on Lipovetsky’s views in *Empire of Fashion*.

20 The need for large-scale interventions, then, should be a rare occurrence. Lipovetsky contends that for some fundamentalists this might represent a return to more traditional ethical preoccupations with topics such intention or
serious dedication to moral imperatives, Lipovetsky concludes that being more immersed in fantasy and less engaged with the real world actually improves social relationships since individuals are now less inclined to purposely cause harm to those with whom they are not as familiar.  

As will be discussed further, however, Lipovetsky appears to be privileging an idealized notion of democracy that uncritically assumes its own value as a promoter of individual freedom. I will assert that this conception of freedom is overly dependent upon autonomous choice to a degree that no longer satisfies Lipovetsky’s own theory. This will be achieved in part via a presentation of Agamben’s thought that will not only challenge Lipovetsky but also shed light upon the critical link between seduction and a complicity in injustice.

Drawing upon Agamben’s work is not incidental here, but is in fact deeply connected to the argument that I have been making throughout this dissertation. First of all, Agamben’s work owes much to the influence of Adorno’s critical theory and he continues working in a similar vein to that tradition, complete with concern for and suspicion of commodification. Secondly, obligation, but for others, and likely the majority of people, this wouldn’t represent change in any grand sense so much as the periodic endorsement of pragmatic situational responses.

21 This deliberately runs counter to the assertions of Alexis de Tocqueville and others who place personal liberty on equal footing with social equality, but hold that the desire to improve one’s economic standing sometimes pales in comparison to a longing on the part of weaker individuals to see others fall to their lower level. Tocqueville attributes the development of close links to one’s community as a way to overcome this apparent selfishness in humans. See Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, 1835.
whereas Lipovetsky dismisses Arendt and Foucault in making his argument, Agamben finds their work to be complementary and mutually supportive in ways that outweigh the individual weaknesses of their work. Most significantly, however, Agamben presents a strong and compelling argument that totalitarianism is still quite common in the world today. Although he argues that it manifests in somewhat different forms that might be better classified according to my categorization of soft-totalitarianism, he presents a model in which these systematic practices map on to the same totalitarian mechanisms as can be recognized in the paradigmatic model of the holocaust. Thus, they are no less ethically problematic. Moreover, this model is dependent upon a core commitment to the premise that what appears to be the exception to the norm or rule of law is often, to the contrary, indicative of the true organizing principle by which these totalitarian mechanisms operate. Thus, Agamben’s model argument will present a persuasive counter-argument that serves to refute Lipovetsky’s contention that totalitarianism is the rare exception to a fairly tolerant democratic pluralism in which freedom is increased by the seductive practices of commodification.

b. Although the Contexts May Change, the Mechanisms of Totalitarianism Remain Similar

The errors in Lipovetsky’s conception of human freedom are related to his views on democracy and totalitarianism. Lipovetsky describes a highly commodified society in which seduction is more common than coercion and the embrace of fashion allegedly displaces totalitarian forces, thus supposedly increasing pluralistic tolerance and reducing individual susceptibility to political extremism. Given this, the examples I have presented in regard to Detroit might appear to fall into his category of social problems that develop as exceptions rather than the norm. However, the notion of what constitutes an exception, particularly in the context
of democratic societies, has been considered philosophically by Agamben in such a way as to pose a significant challenge to this kind of assessment.

Whereas Lipovetsky is dismissive of both Foucault’s and Arendt’s theories on totalitarianism and mass culture, Agamben views them as presenting two streams of thought that are individually insufficient for addressing social injustice but that nonetheless complement each other in ways that can help strengthen an understanding of life within contemporary political systems. This is articulated through what has come to be known as his *Homo Sacer* Project.

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben takes up the task of articulating the relationship between freedom, power, and biopolitical entities. Although he finds similar textual themes reaching as far back as Aristotle, and to a greater degree in the later writings of Carl Schmitt, Agamben credits Arendt for suggesting that the concept of sacred, inalienable human rights is a false one which is shown to quickly disintegrate in the absence of belonging to a nation-state that offers protection to its citizens (HS, p.126). Agamben argues that sovereignty is not primarily a matter of governing subjects or enforcing a social contract so much as it is the power to determine, award, or revoke the status of subjecthood. The sovereign power has command over societal inclusion or exclusion, including granting exceptions to its laws, yet is itself immune to the same regulations. Thus, for Agamben, the defining feature of sovereign power is the ability to ban or exclude (HS, p.110).

In making his argument, Agamben turns to Arendt’s example of the World War II Nazi

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22 Agamben discusses a good deal of Schmitt’s work, particularly in relation to Hitler’s suspension of rights, but rejects Schmitt’s adoption of National Socialism and his penchant for dictatorialism.
system of concentration camps and its emergence as an apparent exception to the rule of law and human rights (HS, pp.140-143). The reality of the concentration camp is frequently labeled as an indescribable anomaly in human history, a unique moment in time when all ethics fail and fall apart. As the epitome of autocratic totalitarianism, the concentration camp appears to stand in stark opposition to the democratic freedoms that, according to Lipovetsky, characterize most of the Western world and which are increasingly found elsewhere. However, despite the prevalent tendency to directly oppose them with the totalitarian regimes of the past, Arendt is reproachful of representative democracies that still contain elements of unjust domination and exploitation.

On Arendt’s view, through the attempted destruction of the class system, movements periodically emerge which lead to the creation of generic masses which are subject to control by bureaucratic, self-preservationist bodies and elitist opportunists. For everyone is alleged to be equal, perhaps even largely interchangeable; however this subsequently becomes a tool for a few to manipulate the masses. In the most basic example, names are erased and replaced by


24 The example used from the Holocaust is the treatment of Jews, homosexuals, the disabled, and others regarded as socially undesirable at the time, who were stripped of their names, personal belongings, hair, etc. in order to treat them as something less than human prior to their deaths. Arendt and Agamben warn of the same mechanism at work, albeit often in vastly different forms, in many instances where power is allegedly said to be “of the people.” This does not mean that either of them necessarily reject democracy, for Arendt (seemingly followed by Agamben) calls for more participatory forms of government, including within democracies. However, neither wish to purport
numbers. Numbers yield statistics, but make tracing individuals all the more difficult. Human bodies themselves become sites of standardization and commodification. In these circumstances democratization depends upon a systematic process of disindividuation that, combined with a general consent to this commodification of human existence, are the hallmarks of the Holocaust. As Agamben sees it, one is only safe as long as one is a citizen, and the benefits of citizenship are always in jeopardy of being revoked at will and without warning if one is deemed to be an exception to the rule of law.

As for Foucault, Agamben is at times critical of his theories but in general describes them as nascent but promising, and he attributes their underdevelopment to Foucault’s relatively early death. Foucault, who either did not recognize or simply failed to acknowledge Arendt’s contributions to the theoretical groundwork that precedes his own, takes a different approach to similar issues of bodily commodification by developing a genealogical analysis of the forces at work in producing contemporary biopolitical subjects (HS, pp.3-4). Consequently, Agamben is greatly indebted to Foucault’s concept of biopower, which refers to the practices through which a government is able to control, and at times manipulate, large groups of people through the technological administration and subjugation of their physical bodies. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explain, through biopower human life is not controlled solely by exterior forces but rather it is regulated:

…from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it-- every individual embraces and reactivates this power of his or her own accord. Its primary task is to administer life.

that democracy is flawless and beyond reproach, particularly when it is entwined with other systemic mechanisms and accepted uncritically.
Biopower thus refers to a situation in which what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p.24).

In both individual and political bodies, people sacrifice their privacy and independent subjectivity as they routinely participate in the mechanization and commodification of their own lives. What is often introduced by an exterior agent as a means to personal and public safety, health, or psychological wellness is attached to a sense of legitimacy that may or may not be justified or ever critically examined, and so it is accepted and adopted in personal practices and habits, often to the detriment of those being manipulated and controlled.

In the world of fashion, one might wonder how many consumer decisions are in fact freely made, especially given the rather generic trends mired in public discourses urging consumers to express their individuality by purchasing mass-produced commodities. This bears

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25 Gilles Deleuze has also written about and expanded on Foucault’s concept of biopower in *Postscript: on the Societies of Control*, 1990.

26 It should be noted that for Foucault, the chief mechanism of control is sexuality, which Hardt and Negri challenge. As Thomas J. Roach, who takes issues with their analysis, explains, “Shifting Foucault's focus from population and social management to labor, globalization, and sovereignty, these authors conceive of biopolitics in economic terms, detailing the consequences of the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist labor practices.

Significantly, whereas Foucault designates sexuality the principal apparatus in the functioning of biopower, Hardt and Negri argue that sexuality in the post-Fordist era is no longer the privileged site of biopolitical control: when human affect, language, and cooperation are subsumed into the productive processes of capital, the gestures, expressions, and movements—indeed, the very flesh—of the social body become commodities” (p.155). See “Sense and Sexuality: Foucault, Wojnarowicz, and Biopower,” *Nebula*, 6.3, September 2009.
directly on Lipovetsky’s conception of freedom, which appears to present a subject liberated 
by a vast array of choices. Whereas Lipovetsky praises the liberating power of fashion, it seems 
that the biopolitical perspective invites skepticism of such claims, especially in regard to the 
narrow sense of fashion as an intersection of commodity and anatomy. As countless studies on 
body dysmorphism and rampant personal body dissatisfaction attest, the contemporary 
biopolitical subject would be far less likely to be liberated by fashion so much as internalize its 
demands for perfection and then self-monitor one’s self against impossible, idealized standards.27

The stakes are higher than simply what one wears, and Lipovetsky’s endorsement of the broader 
sense of fashion as being seductive and ephemeral yet still largely subject-driven also seems suspect.

Most importantly, Foucault’s identification of an inward turn, the moving away from 
external coercion to a location within the lived experience of the body, addresses the 
sociopolitical nexus between external domination or manipulation and the intimate realm of the 
individual body. Since this is central to Agamben’s consideration of freedom, and his model of 
contemporary totalitarianism, it will be discussed in greater detail below.

27 See “The Role of Perfectionism in Body Dissatisfaction,” Tracey D. Wade and Marika Tiggemann, *Journal of Eating Disorders* 1:2, 2013, for a noteworthy study on the link between body dissatisfaction and cultures demanding various forms of perfectionist ideals. Linking bodily self-regulation to internally and externally imposed expectations, Wade and Tiggemann concluded that in regard to Body Mass Indices, “A lower desired BMI was associated with higher levels of Concern over Mistakes and Organisation, and a smaller ideal silhouette was associated with higher levels of Concern over Mistakes and Doubt about Actions and Organisation.”
c. Agamben’s Model of Totalitarianism as a Counterexample to Lipovetsky’s View

In much of his work, Agamben employs the Roman homo sacer or “sacred man,” a figure who may be unceremoniously killed at any time but never officially sacrificed. The life of the homo sacer is stripped of value in that one is always in danger but in such a way that lacks all significance. One is alive, and subsists, but is never really included and protected by the laws of society nor ever truly free from them either. Thus, the homo sacer is set apart and forced to inhabit what Agamben considers zones of indistinction, areas in which ethics and the law are suspended for individuals caught within them. Such individuals are not recognized as citizens or full persons and are reduced to “bare life,” banned from participating in the political realm but nonetheless forced to abide by its rules (HS).

Currently, the suspension of law and the revocation of rights are common during declared states of emergency. Such situations are promoted as exceptions to normal operations, and so Agamben labels both official states of emergency as well as other suspensions of law or ethical policies that exclude certain individuals from the rest of society, as States of Exception. The purported justification for the suspensions and bans that typify states of exception is that such practices are a necessity in times of crisis until order can be restored. However, Agamben contends that appeals to necessity for the sake of order are not always warranted or even well justified. In the worst scenarios, they can be tools of social manipulation serving political or private interests at the expense of others. In addition, he claims that the suspension of law is invoked so frequently that it can no longer be considered an exception. Even after some semblance of stability has been reestablished, elements of the control mechanisms used to obtain it remain in place, thus becoming the rule.

Even representative democracies have far reaching powers to intervene into the lives of
individuals, with more surveillance technology, policing institutions, and large-scale correctional facilities in place than ever before. As the extension of sovereign power has protracted in reach and scope, so has the likelihood of being caught within a declared state of emergency. Bare life, once it is trapped within one of these zones of ethical and legal indistinction, is often forgotten or pushed aside to be dealt with at some distant future time. Meanwhile, for most of those still within regular society, life seemingly goes on as it did before. Consequently, little attention or sense of urgency is afforded to those whose lives have been suspended indefinitely.

Furthermore, Agamben contends that despite the paradigmatic model of totalitarian exception that the Nazi concentration camp appears to represent, it is neither an historical anomaly nor an example limited to dictatorships. One need only to look at the internment camps for Japanese citizens in the United States and Canada during World War II to make comparisons to the same failures in logic and practices that made both possible as well as ostensibly justified to their administrators (SE, p.24).28 In more recent times, Agamben points to the United States government’s hurried enactment of the Patriot Act following the 2001 September Eleventh terrorist attacks. For some, due the suspension of laws and due process, even innocent individuals who are subject to the sweeping reach of a sovereign ban may be caught within a zone of indistinction and have substantial difficulty ever getting out again (SE, pp.3-4). In less extreme cases than imprisonment, albeit nonetheless on a far reaching scale, human rights and various freedoms can be limited in variety of more subtle ways, sometimes in cases when there

28 Historical examples also precede and succeed the World War II era in European democracies, particularly in regard to political refugees from the First World War onward. See Agamben, Homo Sacer, Part III, §7.1, p.167.
appears to be very little justification. Freedom is often sacrificed for the sake of safety and protection, but this leaves many vulnerable and at higher risk than before. Finally, then, what is perhaps most disconcerting about these practices is how frequently when States of Exception that restrict or suspend rights and liberties are encountered, they are justified as being necessary to maintaining order and protecting “freedom.” That is, the suspension of freedom is paradoxically deemed to be warranted by the need for protection of freedom.

For example, reconsider the aforementioned case of Detroit. Detroit is certainly part of a representative democracy, and indeed it is one that seems as open to consumer options and freedom of choice as anywhere else. Yet in many ways it can also be considered an example of a State of Exception. The uneasy balance of law and lawlessness treads a fine line between ensuring the protection of its citizens and an abandonment of the same that allows many to live in extreme poverty and danger even amongst affluent surroundings. In addition, the disproportional effects of the Patriot Act in scrutinizing the Arab American community of nearby Dearborn, Michigan, and its environs provides support for how easily civil rights can be placed in jeopardy, irrespective of legal protections for ethnic, political, or religious affiliation (or lack thereof).

Of course there are no concentration camps in Detroit in the most literal sense of totalitarianism, and it’s important not to lapse into hyperbolic assessments that would not only be inaccurate but also offensive on behalf of those who have endured the horrors of such sites. However, the pluralistic tolerance of others that Lipovetsky touts is also surprisingly difficult to locate. Rather, in looking at Detroit in all of its diverse pluralism, there appears to be a great deal more evidence for abandonment, suffering, and the systematic forgetting of those in need while simultaneously sustaining those who are not than there is to the contrary.
Moreover, situations that form the biopolitical architecture surrounding bare life need not be related to acts of war or terrorism and can also include events such as natural disasters and other events. For example, the abandonment and at times harsh treatment of U.S. citizens during the 2005 Katrina Hurricane in New Orleans or the closing of U.S. coastal areas to the public and media following the massive 2010 British Petroleum oil spill can both be understood as States of Exception that are troubling from both ethical and legal perspectives. According to Agamben, crises and the subsequent deferral of rights have become so frequent, and the threat of being caught up in one is so ever-present that, "Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm" (HS, p.181). Totalitarianism has hardly been replaced by consumer-friendly commodification practices leading to increased tolerance, pluralism, and individual freedom. The state of emergency, within which the law paradoxically creates a space for the suspension of the law, has now become the norm and not the exception.

(iv) The Diminishing Role of Freedom in a Highly Commodified World

In presenting Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* project and presenting his model of the State of Exception, I have illustrated two things: one, that the mechanisms of totalitarianism are neither rare nor restricted in their effects and two, that totalitarianism of this sort isn’t defined by the imposition of coercive laws, but rather by the suspension of law and ethical norms via the

Although presenting Agamben’s work was meant primarily to serve as a counter-argument to bolster my rejection of Lipovetsky’s assessment of ethics and totalitarianism in a highly commodified society typified by seduction, I believe it also speaks to my overall contention that if seduction is just as worthy of ethical consideration as coercion, any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element. Commodification practices, particularly when they are manipulative, pose a threat to freedom and should be viewed as ethically suspect. Individuals are said to be able to make legitimate choices so long as they are free, but how free is anyone really when they are subjected to the constant manipulation and limited choices of a soft-totalitarianism? My genealogical analysis of various discourses on Detroit illustrates the encroachment of commodification on embodied freedom and its currently limited parameters. Not only the ability, but also the willingness, of so many to identify with Eminem’s character is in fact very telling. Countless fans emulate his perceived individuality, while failing to recognize how dis-individualized his character is. Moreover, as for the archetypical city of Detroit as a whole there is always a crisis at hand, be it that of terrorism, violence, economic strife, or a new form of Otherness that needs to be attended to in some urgently severe way yet from which the unwitting bystanders concurrently caught within the system rarely seem to be rescued. Detroit may be viewed as an exception in America, but in many ways it is a microcosmic window on the nation’s struggles. The alluring power of seduction might perpetuate the illusion that things are otherwise, and even help to make life seem more tolerable temporarily, but at the end of the day the evidence points to Agamben’s analysis over Lipovetsky’s. Totalitarianism, in various forms, is alive and well and ethicists that ignore this do so at their peril. Moreover, soft totalitarianism is likely to rely on seductive practices that
aren’t as obviously coercive as more traditional forms of totalitarianism, but are still of great ethical concern.

Thus, I have arrived at a crossroads. On the one hand, Lipovetsky’s work remains relevant because he successfully identifies the paradigm shift from coercion to seduction in commodification practices that now organizes much of contemporary society. However, for Lipovetsky, a defining paradox of our time is that through, “ephemerality, seduction, and marginal differentiation,” humans have achieved greater individuality and a new democratic order (EF, pp.131-132). This model may work well enough when operating according to a theoretical free market of choices, but it ignores the ways in which many of these choices are still orchestrated, or even eliminated. Thus, his avowal that this paradigm shift has resulted in increased freedom and his dismissal of totalitarianism as no longer being a serious, ongoing problem have been shown to be incorrect. In addition, although Lipovetsky seems to maintain faith in a set of checks and balances that restores the possibility of meaningful ethical action, he also seems to pre-suppose that this will be motivated by an appreciation for individual rights and increased policing to enforce those rights. The personal and interpersonal conflicts of the world conveniently remain outside of the fashion form, which should be self-regulating (EF, p.132). Yet all too often it can be shown that, stemming from an alleged necessity to protect life, preserve freedom, and maintain a lawful order, various forms of liberty, rights, and ethical standards are suspended or restricted in ways that do not match up with the limited possibilities that are in fact open (or closed off) to large groups of people on a regular basis.

On the other hand, Agamben recognizes the ongoing reality of lost rights and a pervasive, systematic forgetting that is a constant threat to personal liberty and even physical safety. On Agamben’s view, the defining paradox of our time is the way in which the suspension of human
rights has become accepted as justifiable and necessary for ensuring freedom. Regardless of whether one is living in an allegedly democratic or fascist state, contradictions still exist within that society which all too often make the end result shockingly similar. Namely, through structural relations of fear and manipulation, embodied individuals still find themselves in a position of reductive insignificance, alienation, and even real danger. The paradox here is that the more individuals surrender themselves to socio-political forces that offer protection, the less protection they in fact have.

Increasingly, the battle between freedom and commodification seems to be shifting inward to the body of the individual caught within the machinations of the contemporary world. Nonetheless Agamben, like Adorno, is still problematically working from an ethical model that is largely focused on identifying mechanisms of coercion rather than directly addressing seduction, even though seduction has been shown to be a dominant force in the systemic structures of the present age. Consequently, the neglect of seduction is a weakness in the ability to apply his theory as, in short, it lacks this critical element.

The crux of the problem, then, is how to overcome these limitations and apply Agamben’s model of the State Exception and the reflective apparatus of Adorno’s critical theory to the paradigm shift in commodification in ways that would be useful and relevant to ethicists. Given the argument that, increasingly, the frontline of injustice seems to be shifting inward to the bodies of individuals caught within the machinations of the contemporary world, this project is of particular importance to the area of bioethics. Thus, applying this argument to contemporary bioethics will be the impetus for the next chapter.
“To date, scholars who have commented on such boxes have tended to emphasize their more playful qualities, as if they encapsulated the contents of a magical store or miniature pharmacy. Yet, the format of these boxes is based upon specific historical examples of portable medicine treatment kits that were indispensable in territorial conquest, colonial settlement, and the spread of empire… Cornell may have recognized the importance of these pharmacies in eighteenth- to twentieth century colonisation of territories throughout the world.”


“Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.”

CHAPTER 4: BIOETHICS AND THE DRUGGABLE UNIVERSE

(i) Introduction

In the preceding chapters I have argued that there has been a paradigm shift from commodification as a coercive practice to commodification as a seductive practice, that in this context seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion, and that any ethical theory that fails to take this into account is lacking a critical element. This argument has significant implications for ethicists approaching problems that involve commodification as it relates to issues of human freedom and unjust domination. I have demonstrated that ethicists concerned with commodification need to address the patterns and directions of systematic domination and oppression related to seduction because although seduction commonly involves disingenuous and manipulative practices, ethical theorists often fail to account for the specific manners and territories in which they emerge in forms of commodification. The next step to be taken here, then, is to apply this work in such a way as to demonstrate how this approach is able to overcome the limitations of: a) Lipovetsky’s attempts to address seduction in commodification, which do not adequately account for totalitarianism, as well as b) Adorno and Agamben’s efforts to address commodification in coercion and totalitarianism, which do not adequately account for seductive practices. In order to illustrate how ethicists might go about bridging this gap, I will discuss the trajectory of bioethics in conjunction with the development of the pharmaceutical industry, an interrelated series of events that have largely been viewed as a progressive narrative. Taking into consideration how this narrative plays out in relation to the human body will demonstrate why such reflective endeavors remain important for attending to seduction in widespread commodification practices.
a. *Applied Ethics and the Body*

In my earlier examination of Lipovetsky’s work it became apparent that the human body can be viewed as a nexus between freedom and commodification. To speak of embodied freedom in this context is not meant to imply a metaphysical commitment. Rather, it concerns a non-dualistic, individual subjectivity that is interconnected with societal structures and norms. Foucault can perhaps be considered to have developed the most well-known concept of embodied freedom, by making the connection between agency and freedom, as well as the connection between self-transformation and social transformation, explicit.¹ However, there is also a strain of embodied freedom in Adorno’s work, based on his insistence that freedom is not something that exists in isolation, but is always mediated through individual lived experiences and societal contexts. It is this kind of embodied comportment that lends ethical significance to his notion of critique. Furthermore, Adorno’s use of human suffering as an indicator of injustice and oppression provides a corporeal objectivity to ethical consideration that is in accordance with the notion of linking corporeal bodies and issues of freedom.² In a similar vein, it was noted previously that Agamben, following Foucault as well as Arendt, is also deeply concerned with forces of domination that are encroaching onto both political bodies and individual bodies.

¹ In *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, Margaret A. McLaren elaborates on Foucault’s conception of embodied agency and argues that his theorization on the link between self and society can be an invaluable tool for feminist critique and political thought, among other uses.

² A similar contention has been raised by Wing-Kai Lok in regard to Levinas. Lok argues that Foucault’s notion of the ethically embodied subject, which rejects dualism and relies heavily on social constructionist views, can be beneficially augmented with an appeal to Levinas’ argument that the recognition of human suffering drives ethical behavior. See Lok, Wing-Kai, *Foucault, Levinas and the Ethical Embodied Subject*, a doctoral thesis, Institute for Christian Studies, submitted July 5, 2011, http://hdl.handle.net/10756/274413, accessed May 2014.
This chapter will seek to expand on these conversations by addressing the human body in a similar manner.

The human body is frequently viewed as a site of exploration. For those motivated by scientific advancement, profit, or both, it is often seen as a place of vast resources to be understood, and at times even conquered, down to the smallest detail. This presents an opportunity to speculate on how the interconnected relationship between science and industry raises ethical concerns with regard to commodification. I will argue that recent efforts to more effectively identify target markets for pharmaceutical intervention employ a methodological terminology that is readily co-opted and commodified by industry interests. It thus becomes possible to conceptualize individual embodiment as a commodity, and from this conceptualization parallels may be drawn to evidence of shifting paradigms in business strategy. As the lines between what has traditionally been marked off as business ethics and bioethics increasingly blur, they merge within an arena that similarly exhibits a growing ambiguity in regard to what gets classified as a preventable, treatable, or curable healthcare condition. Consequently, these paradigm shifts can have very real consequences for embodied freedom.

Three questions that will be addressed are:

1) Is there a way in which commodification as a seductive practice holds out the promise of increased freedom but can instead lead to diminishing choices and less control for individuals, even with regard to their own bodies?

2) Can decisions that individuals make in regard to their own bodies have ethical implications, and perhaps detrimental ones, for others?
3) Even if individuals are largely at the mercy of structural forces beyond their control, is it possible to limit or reduce one’s susceptibility to oppressive ideologies?

The answer to each of these questions, it will be shown, is yes.

b. A Few Remarks on the Method Employed

As with works of visual art, narratives can exhibit tensions that bring social contradictions to the forefront for further reflection. According to Anne Hudson Jones and P.J. Tomlin, in the realm of medical ethics the examination of narratives can be beneficial as a means to:

…”fleshing out" issues or dilemmas in medical ethics by showing them embedded in a particularised human context complicated by powerful emotions and complex interpersonal dynamics… The contributions of narrative to medical ethics come primarily in two ways: firstly, from the use of stories (narratives) for their mimetic content-- that is, for what they say; and secondly, from the methods of literary criticism and narrative theory for their analysis of diegetic form-- that is, for their understanding of how stories are told and why it matters (Jones and Tomlin, 1999, p.253).

For similar reasons, making use of narratives is common in the literature of Postcolonial thought. Postcolonialism’s attention to the practices of colonization and imperialism has developed via a methodological tradition which has much in common with Adorno’s attempts to uncover the non-identical, that which is ignored, suppressed, or overlooked in establishing identity. Attending to a narrative in this way serves as a tool for illuminating the commodifying forces at play in various situations that may have otherwise escaped different methodologies.
By presenting a trajectory of the pharmaceutical industry that moves from past practices of drug development and marketing through to more recent efforts dedicated to mapping the human genome, it becomes possible to recognize a narrative that displays a dialectic dissymmetry between the practical task of science and the desires of a commodifying agent that could be considered as akin to a colonizing force. Yet as will be shown, unlike many traditional Postcolonial narratives which uncover conceptual patterns of domination related to systematic forgetting and coercion, this narrative of change in the pharmaceutical industry not only illustrates how individuals unwittingly allow such work to be done, but also how often they actually welcome, request, or even demand domination, potentially even against their own best interests. In this regard, individuals are not coerced so much as seduced by the promise of scientific advancement and, as a result, they invite and support such an undertaking without, perhaps, fully recognizing the risks involved. In some cases these accepted risks do not simply affect one’s own individual body, but also support mechanisms that put others at risk as well. Yet this complicity can be overlooked when ethicists do not fully consider the scope and ethical ambiguity of seduction in orchestrating these demands, and insufficient reflection leaves these practices relatively unchecked, thus enabling their perpetuity and growth.

Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to consider how the thesis of this essay might be applied to ethical issues in the pharmaceutical industry, particularly involving drug development and marketing in relation to embodied freedom. What I aim to show is that by adopting a critical stance to commodification as a seductive practice, even in a world marked by ethical ambiguity, it is still possible to make society less susceptible to dangerous ideologies as well as work to uncover and transform systematic structures of oppression as a matter of social justice.
(ii) A Call to Ethicists to Reevaluate Their Discipline

Adorno’s aesthetics provides a method with which to identify the internal tensions that are embedded within works of art. Not only can these tensions shed light on societal contradictions they can also, in their resistance to complete resolution, give rise to framing the ethical questions that surround these contradictions. Consider, for example, Joseph Cornell’s Untitled (Pharmacy).

Encased within the shadow-box of Untitled (Pharmacy) are a number of carefully aligned jars displayed in the manner of a medicine cabinet. Containing an array of curious contents, the bottles might evoke nostalgia for an earlier time of tinctures and old fashioned remedies. With the inclusion of a sea shell, butterfly wings, leaves, and a fruit pit alongside aluminum foil, wood shavings, and other found ephemera, they also give rise to a number of internal tensions to be considered, such as: organic versus synthetic, authentic versus fake, free versus captured, physician versus patient, and cure versus quackery. Perhaps most notably for this project, it can be viewed as a piece that illustrates the routine research practice of containing life as part of the quest to preserve it.

Although it lacks the overt commodification of Pop Art and the commercialization of personal identity found in the cinematic and post-cinematic film industries, a piece such as Untitled (Pharmacy) perhaps presages their later arrivals by suggesting the following questions with regard to commodification and the human body: What is to be the logical end of instrumentally encapsulating life in specimen bottles placed on dusty shelves, or by analogy, what is to be the result of dividing research into ever more specialized areas such that they lose external reference, relevance, and reflection? What is to become of life, treated as indistinct from commodity, caught within the balance of an otherwise progressive narrative?
As has previously been shown, Agamben’s elaborations on the State of Exception and other zones of indistinction demonstrate that oppressive, totalitarian structures are still very much at work today. These mechanisms of exception, in which the forfeiture of freedom inevitably fails to make good on the promise of increased security, are contiguous with Adorno’s identification of a culture characterized by its lack of enduring resistance to ideology and administered life. Freedom is decreased in the guise of ensuring liberty, while vulnerability is increased in the name of protection.

However, as in Adorno’s work, Agamben’s analysis of the relationship between the mass production of culture and the diminution of life to a biopolitical reality where even basic rights are in constant jeopardy is still strongly oriented toward viewing instances of commodification in terms of coercion rather than seduction. As such, it becomes subject to the same potential criticisms once leveled by Lipovetsky against Adorno. However, I propose that by further probing Agamben’s concept of *homo sacer*, a space emerges wherein it becomes possible to think more deeply about the role that seductive mechanisms currently play in forms of systematic domination and oppression. As they intersect with issues of the body, these seductive practices are at work at various times.

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4 It should be noted that my efforts here are not meant to be mistaken for replacing an awareness of coercive practices as presented by Agamben with only those of seduction, for it seems likely that in practice both coercive and seductive practices are at work at various times.
mechanisms are relevant to the changing face of contemporary bioethics. I contend that it is possible to witness direct parallels between 1) the paradigm shift from commodification as a coercive practice to one highly characterized by seduction and 2) a paradigm shift that has occurred between the marketing models of non-medical fields and the practices within biomedical fields today. Particularly in the area of pharmaceutical sales, this intersectional change can be understood as a paradigmatic move from a model of commodification as a coercive practice to one that is highly seductive in nature. Yet claims of this kind must contend with the presence of a progressive narrative that relatively unquestionably focuses on medical advancement and achievement in the field. Consequently, I argue that bioethicists must recognize the ways in which the ethical playing field has shifted, and adjust their work accordingly in order to account for different challenges to freedom and justice.

To accomplish this, I will first present an extended consideration of the American pharmaceutical industry in which I provide evidence to support my contention that recent efforts to more effectively target patients for pharmaceutical intervention employ strategies that purport to increase freedom of choice but in many respects also serve to co-opt and commodify human bodies. I will then move to consider these structural shifts in regard to research directed at mapping the human genome and the narratives surrounding what has come to be referred to as “druggable space.” In the end, examining these narratives demonstrates a need to rethink and reformulate how ethicists characterize forces of domination as well as how ethicists can work more effectively to oppose or resist systems of unjust domination.

(iii) Commodification, Ethics, and the Pharmaceutical Industry

a. Why Ethicists Should Recognize Influences and Interdependence Across Disciplines
Ethicists today are faced with a wide range of interdisciplinary concerns, but interdisciplinarity is not always a prominent feature of ethical consideration. Rather, the course of ethics in general is not altogether unlike the division of labor model that once concerned Adorno. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that industrialized society was typified by a division of labor that cleaved intellectual and manual work from one another, which thus laid the groundwork for future commodification and domination. As an intellectual labor and academic discipline, philosophy has similarly continued to narrow in focus into ever more specialized categories. Out of ethics, additional subdisciplines such as business ethics and bioethics have emerged to address the practical aspects of ethical thought in specific fields. The benefits of domain specificity lie in opportunities for high-quality standardization, particularly of professional practices, and the development of focused expertise. However, as noted by Adorno, the division of labor model is also troublesome, or at least limiting, in that it runs the risk of becoming self-referential, uncritical, and/or improperly hierarchical. I contend that this is potentially problematic for the discipline of ethics.

In practice, the various ethical subdisciplines often overlap with one another and also influence, as well as are influenced by, other disciplines and societal structures. Some attempts have already been made to address this specificity in order to improve how applied ethics is practiced. For example, whereas the field known as “medical ethics” once summarily blanketed ethical issues and decisions related to the practice of medical care, Van Rensselaer Potter suggested that adopting the term “bioethics” would allow for an expanded consideration of issues that also included medical technologies, scientific advances, and a broader range of issues pertaining to biological corporeality (Potter, 1971, p.26). New biomedical technologies alone frequently give rise to new ethical questions, many of which pertain to rights and responsibilities
on various individual, professional, and societal levels. In this way the broader field of “bioethics” provides a working vocabulary and open structure that had previously been unavailable to ethicists working on these issues.

Furthermore, as it covers more ground than the more narrowly framed field of “medical ethics,” bioethics tends to cross over into other domains, including the legal arenas of private ownership and public policy. In cases involving *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) or third-party gestational surrogacy, for instance, the main issues to be addressed are no longer limited to assessing the procedures themselves, such as in determining the ethical permissibility of IVF or even the question of who, if anyone, has a right to employ such techniques as a method of human reproduction. Now there are frequent appeals to determine who has a right to custody in the event that a child is produced, who has ownership of the biological materials if one is not, and how to resolve the ethical as well as legal standing of virtually everything in between. In many respects, the broader scope of contemporary bioethics now encompasses multiple spheres of interest to address this increasing complexity created by technology and other factors.

Employing the narrower focus of the division of intellectual labor seems most beneficial when providing a means to extract specific questions from the wider context in which many bioethical issues exist. However, this could come at the price of artificially severing bioethicists from engaging in critical reflection of their own discipline and its position in relation to others. In short, ethicists are at risk of being caught within a self-referential loop. Bioethicists who fail to expand their scope of attention are more likely to be ill-equipped to work with those from fields in which they lack sufficient understanding and vice versa, creating isolationist circles in
which theory rarely generates well-informed praxis. Consequently, the demands of today’s complex bioethical field necessitate an interdisciplinary approach.

b. Bioethical Interdisciplinarity Includes the Consideration of Commodity Practices

By no means is addressing bioethical interdisciplinarity a simple task, however. The rapid pace at which technology is expanding makes interdisciplinary conversations ever more difficult, and fostering openness to exchange can be hindered by the financial stakes that usually accompany research, development, and implementation. Not altogether unlike Adorno’s conception of an autonomous monad, medical treatment was once viewed as essentially beyond the purview of commodification. Yet recent times, most visibly in the United States but also elsewhere throughout the industrialized world, have exhibited the positioning of the medical field as a profit-generating industry. As Kevin White efficiently summarizes:

In the health area, the process includes the increasing need to buy medical services to gain better health status. Increasing areas of health care have become commodified for exchange on the market and fewer and fewer areas of non-market-based resources are available to individuals. In the past this worked in favour of the developing professions, producing a market for their services. Now, however, the significance of commodification is the ‘bottom-line’ of profit maximalization that it introduces into the delivery of health care. The combination of specialization and commodification has given rise to what in the USA has been called the ‘medical-industrial complex’ (Relman, 1980) (White, 2009, p.100).

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A prime example of how commodification and the “medical-industrial complex” have led to a blurring of the lines between the promise of science and the profiteering of industry can be found in the large pharmaceutical companies which have collectively come to be known by the shorthand nickname “Big Pharma.” Research on the relationship between bioethics and Big Pharma has tended to be focused chiefly in regard to either: a) research ethics in the development and testing of pharmaceuticals or b) fair resource allocation once the pharmaceuticals are admitted to the open market. Both of these are further complicated by economic forces and business practices, making the ethical consideration of Big Pharma all the more challenging.

In addition to the pharmaceutical industry, and despite legal prohibitions that attempt to restrain enterprises such as biological organ sales and child adoption trafficking, a notable increase in practices that skirt the lines of legality (such as the selling of certain biological products and surrogacy for compensation) appear to indicate that there is a growing acceptance of the commodification of embodiment in general. This growing complexity, irrespective of how daunting a project it presents, only underscores the importance of looking more closely at points of intersectionality. Just as how theorists working in the once relatively discrete disciplines of race, class, gender, and sexuality have come to acknowledge the need to consider their reciprocally constitutive characters, the terrain of bioethics is such that contemporary bioethicists must address the discipline’s relationship to economic commercialization, commodification, and questions of human freedom.

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*See The Commodification of Health Care, Sara Henderson and Alan Petersen, editors. New York: Routledge, 2001.*
To begin to address this intersectionality, in the sections that follow I argue that it is possible to recognize gradual yet significant changes in certain areas of health care that indicate a movement toward practices more closely resembling the ways in which business and industry attract and retain customers.

As the lines between what has traditionally been delineated as business ethics and bioethics overlap, they merge within a sphere that similarly exhibits a growing ambiguity in regard to what gets classified as a preventable, treatable, or curable healthcare condition. It will be shown that when the medical field begins following suit with a recognizable paradigm shift seen in other industries, it raises new ethical questions and concerns regarding how commodification intersects with medical treatment at various junctions. Specifically, I contend that there have been significant changes in the United States from the ways in which prescription pharmaceuticals were previously manufactured and administered to how they are frequently marketed and prescribed today. These changes demand further investigation into the relationship between health care and commodification as well as a reconsideration of the role of the ethicist in regard to the future of biomedical research and application.

c. Adorno’s Pharmacy: Commodification Intersects with Medical Research

Although Adorno and Horkheimer were not directly addressing health care at the time, their critique of the Culture Industry, replete with warnings against commodification encroaching on human existence in previously unthought-of ways, certainly seems relevant to a number of issues being raised today in relation to the pharmaceutical industry in the United States. The United States hardly stands alone in its adoption of merging capitalist business practices with medicine, and the earliest examples of large-scale pharmaceutical companies were in fact
European.\textsuperscript{7} However, it appears that no other nation of its size and stature has been so thoroughly willing to embrace the legitimacy of “for profit” medicine. The operative reasoning allegedly justifying this system is that, as a whole, the greater good benefits from a free market economy in which competition drives research and development, allows for creative innovation at faster speeds, and provides a high degree of drug availability to a mass populace. Yet whether or not this system actually works well in practice has become the subject of much speculation.

In January of 2014, two pieces of legislation signed by President Barack Obama, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010, went into effect in the United States. The proposed purpose of the legislation was to reduce the prohibitive burdens of a for-profit medical system by expanding Medicaid coverage as well as by mandating health insurance coverage, offered to lower income earners at reduced or subsidized prices, with more governmental regulation surrounding the specific benefits and limitations of individual policies. Although it is too soon to determine the effectiveness of the legislation, and there are a many vocal proponents and critics alike, it is important to keep in mind that the legislation as originally drafted was not meant to do away with insurance companies, federalize health care, or eliminate the profit motive from medicine. Furthermore, although some of the legislation affects pharmaceuticals, much of it is not aimed directly at the pharmaceutical industry and at this time there are no price controls in effect for the regulation of prescription drug costs. Thus, it is as yet unclear what the ultimate effect of on the

\textsuperscript{7} Gerrit Reepmeyer points to Roche, founded in 1896 in Basel, Switzerland, as being one of the first large-scale leaders in pharmaceutical production. It continues to be an industry leader, with various research centers worldwide. See Reepmeyer’s \textit{Risk-sharing in the Pharmaceutical Industry: The Case of Out-licensing}, Heidelberg: Physica-Verlag, 2006, p.115.
pharmaceutical industry will be, and most the previously existing questions about accessibility and affordability with regard to pharmaceuticals currently remain.

Andersen, Rice, and Kominski contend that barring some recent price accelerations, the United States has exhibited a history of low national spending on pharmaceuticals, with only moderate increases in prices over time (Andersen, Rice, and Kominski, 2011, p.179). Even now, they assert, the average prices of pharmaceuticals appear to be overstated because most analyses are inaccurately convoluted by changing factors related to the insurance industry, and most signs of true inflation can be tied to the emergence of newer, “branded” drugs within the competitive marketplace while older, generic drug prices are actually in decline (Andersen, Rice, and Kominski, 2011, p.179). This seems to suggest a type of acceptable free market trade-off, which awards initial risk-taking and ingenuity, but ultimately makes more, and better, drugs available to a large population. Nonetheless, Andersen, Rice, and Kominski also assert that prior to drawing any final conclusions from this data further research should be done on recent changes in the regulatory policies of the Federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which they contend seem to require little in the way of quality advancement before a retooled drug goes to market, as well as what they deem to be a critical need for a better understanding of the extent and breadth of competition in pharmaceutical markets (Andersen, Rice, and Kominski, 2011, pp.179-180).

Regardless of whether price increases are being driven mainly by the pharmaceutical industry, the insurance industry’s unwillingness to pay for prescription medications, insurance industry demands for higher premiums, or a combination of these factors, there is a growing concern over drug pricing and affordability in the United States. The inability to pay for medications has placed a great number of individuals in personal jeopardy, particularly when
they find themselves unable to afford patented life-saving medications to which there are no generic alternatives and/or when health insurance carriers deny access to the most promising treatments. The uninsured and underinsured can also be viewed as a collective burden on publicly funded sources, many of which are stretched close to their limits in meeting their ethical and legal commitments to provide a minimum standard of care or better to all, regardless of ability to pay. Suggesting worst case scenarios, a lack of adequate prescription drug coverage not only affects individuals, it can also increase the risk of global pandemic when communicable diseases go untreated.

As for research and development, partly due to changes in FDA testing regulations but also because of profit potential, new products are frequently reaching the public faster than in previous years. With shorter waiting periods as drugs make their way through the testing pipelines, newer therapeutic treatments become available sooner. However, manufacturers’ recalls on account of safety concerns, such as statistically significant rates of unacceptable side effects or even death, are not nearly as uncommon as the public might hope. Moreover, in the mass-marketing of prescription drugs, whether or not the known risks involved in taking certain medications always outweigh the benefits of addressing the condition a medication was designed to treat is further obscured by the question of whether or not patients are being provided with sufficient information to understand these risks.

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8 In addition to problems with serious, unintended side-effects from certain drugs, Pfizer has repeatedly faced legal challenges and fines for marketing drugs for purposes which had not been approved by the FDA. See Gardiner Harris, “Pfizer Pays $2.3 Billion to Settle Marketing Case” in The New York Times, September 9, 2009 for information on the controversial, high profile case of Pfizer’s pain management drug, Bextra.
The effectiveness of the current system is debatable. Although access to effective pharmaceuticals are only one part of larger whole concerning life expectancy and overall quality of life and care, the World Health Organization’s assessment report on global health systems ranked the United States, “37 out of 191 countries according to its performance” (World Health Organization, 2000). Meanwhile, even as many other industries struggled to stay profitable in an anemic economy, the pharmaceutical industry continued to post steady growth in net returns for several consecutive years. Following this trajectory, one might conclude that patients are being treated as target markets rather than as individuals and, subsequently, people are being forced to put a price on their own health and well-being that many can ill-afford to pay. As such, it might seem extremely tempting to simply vilify pharmaceutical companies as shamelessly unethical entities who consistently put profits ahead of people, regardless of the social costs. Yet hasty condemnations of this sort neither fully explain how an initially rational logic aimed at attaining both health and economic benefits could result in such stark inconsistencies, nor do they provide a mode for understanding why the current system persists and continues to be viewed as ethical and acceptable by so many. So in order to delve deeper into these issues it will be beneficial to examine two noteworthy, paradigmatic movements, one in medical ethics and the other in

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9 A ten year study conducted by Janet Spitz and Mark Wickham concluded that pharmaceutical firms’ profits outpaced the total industry average by three to thirty-three percent, leading them to advocate that despite the industry’s claims to high research and development costs, it should no longer go unchallenged as a substantial contributor to unusually high inflation in the cost of medical care. See Spitz and Wickham, “Pharmaceutical High Profits: The Value of R&D, or Oligopolistic Rents?” in the American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Volume 71, Issue 1, January 2012, pp.1–36.
business, and examine the ways in which they interrelate and continue to inform the bioethical landscape.

(iv) The False Promise of Commodification as a Seductive Practice

a. Push Versus Pull Strategies: A Paradigm Shift from Coercion to Seduction

Business and medicine have been bedfellows for a very long time, but as the emerging specialized areas of applied ethics tended to follow a division of labor model, medical ethics and business ethics developed chiefly as separate domains. Prior to the late twentieth century, medical ethicists certainly had an interest in determining best practices regarding which pharmaceuticals were prescribed and who had access to them. However, for the most part, ethical emphasis was placed elsewhere, particularly on questions of care, duty or obligation, and other patient-focused matters of this sort. Perhaps the greatest systemic shift in contemporary medical ethics has been the move away from a predominantly paternalist ethos to one that protects and promotes the value of patient autonomy.

In the paternalist tradition, which through the 1970s had been the prevailing norm, the physician is viewed as an educated expert with the right to make decisions on behalf of their patients “for their own good,” even if this sometimes runs counter to their wishes. Essentially, it is an authoritative, “doctor knows best” system that puts a presumed orientation toward beneficence ahead of patient rights. This came to be challenged by ethicists who argued instead to advance most patients’ capacity and right to self-determination in the context of moral choices. As Raymond J. Devettere explains:

Medical paternalism was bound to run into difficulties with the many modern philosophies and theologies of individual choice. The major value is no longer what
someone else, even a caring physician, thinks is good but what the patient thinks is good
and what the patient chooses. Beneficence remains an important value-- no patient in his
right mind wants anything bad done to him-- but the autonomy of the patient has become
a crucial value as well. In the language of those who conceive of ethics as a matter of
principles, the principle of autonomy has emerged and in some cases has come to
dominate the principle of beneficence in health care ethics (Devetere, 2010, p.52).

Autonomy thus emerged as the prevailing über-value that sets the standard for contemporary
medical ethics, and the right of a rational individual to make an informed, un-coerced decision,
became the new norm to which medical practitioners primarily adhere.

The effects of this value reprioritization were substantial in regard to both medical
research and therapeutic care, altering past approaches to such diverse issues as privacy, truth-
telling, informed consent, and the use of placebos in research. Yet by contrast, attention to
assessing the mundane procedure of prescribing drugs for various conditions and maladies
lagged behind other ethical considerations. The basic *modus operandi* for prescribing
medications remained essentially the same. Taking what Wroe Anderson referred to as a
“vicarious search” approach, as Mickey C. Smith elaborates, the physician typically, “searches
the characteristics of available products for the patient (who is not equipped to judge) for that
which most closely resembled the answer to the patient’s problem” (Smith, 1991, p.5). Given
this, Big Pharma’s marketing efforts focused primarily on strategies that would first make
physicians and pharmacists aware of a company’s products and then attempt to influence them to
see that their drugs were prescribed to patients. Commonly, this involved advertising in medical
journals, direct mail advertisements, office visits by representative salespeople, and promotional
items or other incentives provided to medical practitioners.

Due to the commonality of attitudes and practices at the time, only gradually did the
consideration of pharmaceutical sales come to be discussed as an intersection of business ethics
and medical ethics. Whereas the end goal of medicine is typically health and the end goal of
business is typically wealth, ethicists began to call into question whether the incentives offered to
medical practitioners by highly competitive sales representatives might be so great as to
constitute an unethical conflict of interest. Since patient welfare is ultimately affected by the
consequences of underprescribed or overprescribed medications, physicians were forced to
confront their participation in a production model that seemed inherently coercive.

Even as physicians’ groups issued warnings and prohibitions on unethical behaviors, of
which the degree of adoptive success varies widely, additional industry changes would prove to
be less obvious in their influence, if not in their impact. Namely, toward the end of the twentieth
century, a major shift occurred in the managerial strategies that many industries employed in
conducting business with regard to supply chain management and marketing. Prior to this time
the dominant tactic was what has come to be known as a “Push” strategy whereby a seller would
develop products and then promote or “push” them toward distributors, principally by attempting
to gain purchase order commitments through personal selling and incentives. The distributors
would then sell their products to consumers. The manufacturer’s objective is not just to develop
and sell an individual product, but also to foster brand recognition such that when distributors
and consumers exercise their purchasing power, they will recognize a certain type of product
when they see it and, ideally, elect to purchase a specific brand tied to an individual company.
In the conventional method of pharmaceutical marketing, sales representatives tout the value of a patented drug while simultaneously incentivizing brand loyalty to physicians by offering them various perks and rewards. Physicians function as distributors, and even though they do not profit directly from the sale of medications, industry marketing practices can nonetheless institute a system in which it can be in a physician’s personal interest to prescribe specific drugs to patients. Moreover, in recognizing the value of long-term distributive partners, pharmaceutical companies began marketing not just to physicians, but also to residents and even medical students to the extent that in 2004, a year in which less than $2 billion dollars was spent on pharmaceutical marketing campaigns in Canada, pharmaceutical firms in the United States expended an estimated sum of between $30 and $57 billion dollars on marketing efforts alone (Barfett, Lanting, J. Lee, M. Lee, Ng, and Simkhovitch, 2007, p.21).

Although Push strategies remain common in numerous industries, a noticeable shift occurred when companies began to discover the benefits of developing a “Pull strategy” as well. With a Pull strategy, the consumer initially does not have much in the way of direct knowledge or interaction with a product, but desire for it is created by employing a strategy that, as Ira Kalb describes, “is designed to create a strong demand for your products that pulls customers through the turnstiles of your distribution channels” (Kalb, 1998, 268). Instead of pushing products toward distributors, marketing efforts are directed at the end users by way of enticement, encouraging them to seek out the product and to ask for it in stores, in this way “pulling” the

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10 This is not meant to suggest that U.S. pharmaceutical companies do not make a profit in Canada. A key difference in the two nations is that the Canadian system includes price control measures that limit what companies can charge for drugs. This notwithstanding, U.S. companies can and do make a profit in Canada, just a marginally lower profit than in the United States.
product through the distribution channels to fulfill consumer demands. For example, instead of waiting for a consumer’s toaster to cease working and then having him or her visit a store and select a replacement from the various kinds sitting on the shelf, television commercials might tout the amazing new features of Brand X’s toaster, attempt to foster a sense of inadequacy about one’s existing toaster, and encourage consumers to seek out just such a new and improved toaster for themselves, often for a limited time, while supplies last. The consumer then proceeds to demand the product from a store or retailer, which has reduced or no inventory, and subsequently orders the product to meet this demand.

Since the demand for the product seems to initiate with the end user, a Pull strategy can help promote a sense of satisfaction with customers who believe that they choose which products they buy free from the influence of salespersons at the point of purchase, and in keeping with their sense of personal identity, even though their actual options may not be significantly different than what they were before the strategy was implemented.

Most industries that adopted the techniques of a Pull strategy did so in combination with a Push strategy, and businesses reap the advantages of a demand driven supply chain where inventory costs are lowered by increased production-to-order rather than the riskier and more expensive option of stocking products and shipping them to distributors when demand uncertainty is great. Thus, if done well, a combined Push-Pull strategy reinforces brand loyalty as consumers become convinced that they know exactly what they want and so become less

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11 Keeping quantities seemingly limited but actively overseeing the distribution chain so that the products can be delivered just in time to meet consumer demand lowers stocking costs by reducing inventory taxes, storage overhead costs, and waste associated with unsold products.
likely to be swayed by the temptation of similar products or generic brands deemed to be inferior or less suited to the customers’ personal images of themselves. The more customizable the marketing appeal, the more successful these efforts seem to be at creating a desire for a product and then having the consumers demand it from retailers or even directly from the manufacturers themselves. To describe this process by way of a familiar analogy, although any Model T Ford on the lot might satisfy a need for basic transportation, the seductive allure of a Chrysler 200 is that it can also allegedly fulfill desires for status, security, and luxury and, if properly marketed to, the customers will arrive demanding to be sold one. An efficacious Push-Pull strategy will do just that, for nearly any given product in nearly any given industry.

All of this may be well and good in the competitive field of business. Yet in the quasi-medical-industrial realm of pharmaceuticals, it takes on added ethical dimensions. Moreover, it is significant that, via enticement, the commodification method embraced by the pharmaceutical industry is heavily reliant upon seduction.

Given the effectiveness of the combined Push-Pull technique in numerous industries, it is not surprising that the pharmaceutical industry similarly wanted to follow suit. As of 2008, regulatory agencies in most countries had summarily rejected lobbying efforts to change existing policies; however, two nations – New Zealand and the United States – began allowing the direct to consumer marketing of prescription medications (Frosch and Grande, 2010, p.1). Marketing efforts were no longer focused primarily on physicians and pharmaceutical companies instead turned their attention to individual patients, or even potential patients- as-consumers. Commercials for various prescription medications began flooding television airwaves, not only promoting products by creating an initial awareness of their existence, but also listing symptoms
of various conditions and then urging potential customers to “ask your doctor” if a certain brand-name medication is, “right for you.” Nationally syndicated magazines began running advertisements that sometimes included coupons for free samples to be redeemed when visiting their physician or postage-paid postcards that could be submitted for water bottles, hats, or other promotional items bearing the name of the medication. Larger-than-life pills began appearing on roadside billboards and the sides of buildings.

In other words, Big Pharma’s companies effectively began working to create demand for certain medications before a patient ever enters into a physician’s office, perhaps even initiating a visit to the physician that the individual might not have otherwise made. These practices ushered in a whole new era of patients requesting specific, branded, and usually patented medications to treat symptoms for previously diagnosed or as yet undiagnosed, real or perceived, medical conditions, with prescriptions written by physicians who are often quite willing to oblige them in their seemingly autonomous requests.12

In a nutshell, then, with the creation of the “health care industry,” which now includes direct to consumer marketing of pharmaceuticals, the commodification of health and the human body has reached heretofore unprecedented levels. The medical field has been profoundly shaped by two paradigm shifts which have resulted in the following related changes: 1) the acceptance of a business model that incorporates Pull as well as Push strategies in pharmaceutical marketing and distribution, and 2) the prioritization of the value of autonomy such that subsequently the

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next instrumental step in advancing individual rights in relation to health-care choices is that patients are now provided with more information on available treatment options than ever before, but this information often originates from companies who have a sizeable financial stake in how frequently certain pharmaceuticals are prescribed. Moreover, as will be discussed next in greater detail, just as the Push method of distribution has been shown to include a potentially coercive element about which bioethicists have previously raised concern, the Pull method is similarly problematic, even if it is more ethically ambiguous due to what initially seems to be a greater allowance for autonomous volition.

The paradigm shift in pharmaceutical marketing speaks directly to the consideration of the distinction between coercion and seduction, particularly as the human body once again becomes the locus of tensions between commodification and embodied freedom. This would then imply that it is worthy of serious ethical consideration, and bioethicists would be remiss in excluding these specific mechanisms or underestimating the role they play in constructing an ideology of health as being intertwined with consumer choice.

Still, before going further it is worth noting that regardless of how unseemly the comingling of medical care and financial interest might appear from the start, I would nonetheless caution against a quick dismissal which alleges that no benefits have resulted from these shifts whatsoever. For instance, one potential objection that might be raised is that although changes have come about more slowly in regard to how pharmaceutical prescriptions are developed and distributed than in other areas addressed in bioethics, the adoption of Pull strategies does seem to advance a degree of respect for patient autonomy. Even though some physicians protest that direct-to-consumer marketing has initiated an undesirable trend toward
self-diagnosis, many of today’s patients-as-consumers are more knowledgeable with regard to
available drugs and they also have a greater say in selecting courses of treatment than they did in
the days when the paternalistic “vicarious search” method was their only real option. As long as
personal autonomy remains the supreme value guiding the course of bioethics, then it would
seem that even though some concerns surrounding commodification might be reasonable, they
are nonetheless subjugated to the notion that personal liberty and volition are of the utmost
importance, at least insofar as no one is hurting anyone else. Yet this is precisely where
plumbing the ethical dimensions of the Pull strategy becomes most telling.

A main component of Adorno’s criticism of commodification hinges on the contention
that privileging one value above and largely to the exclusion of all others—whether it be
autonomy, beneficence, profit, or what have you—will ultimately arrive at a paradoxical reversal
of the instrumental reason that initially motivated it. If the notion of an ideal autonomy is
employed to justify these marketing practices and the consequences they entail, do the
pharmaceutical companies actually deliver on this tacit promise of freedom? Do people really
have more, and indeed better, health care options than ever before? Do new pharmaceuticals
indicate that human needs are being met in novel or more effective ways? Or is it the case that
individuals are frequently being convinced that they have new needs which can only be met by a
relatively small selection of premium, brand-name, patented pharmaceuticals?

The answers to these questions involve a combination of all of the above. Pull strategies
are not directly coercive, and they do allow for more choice than push strategies insofar as that
no one is unilaterally telling patients that in order to get better they must take the drug
prescribed. However, just as many commercials for non-medical products advertise proposed
lifestyles and affective states as much or more so than the functions of the goods or services for sale, pharmaceutical advertising can be just as seductive in the creation of desire and its magnetic “pull” toward certain medications. How this exhibits a potential for deception and harm will now be addressed.

b. Emphasizing the Alleged Volition in Seduction Can Be Detrimental to One’s Health and the Wellbeing of Others

One concern that emerges from pharmaceutical Pull strategies pertains to the problematization of previously uncategorized conditions or syndromes that seem to have slim evidence to support them as being medical problems at all. Lifestyle drugs, as they are termed, refer to the pharmaceuticals developed to treat these new conditions, and the way in which they are marketed could be characterized as commodification as a seductive practice. Moreover, this practice has already raised some concern. Working through Adorno’s concept of “natural history,” Adrian Daub contends that:

The “abolition of good health” – that is to say the profusion of new drugs aimed at remedying previously normalized conditions, and its attendant cottage industry laboring to declare everything from shyness to menopause a “syndrome” – has been one of the most striking features of capitalism’s invasion into the previously semi-detached realm of medicine, and, as such, one of the hallmarks of “late capitalism.” The consumer is now no longer asked to simply accessorize body and mind. Body and mind are in fact themselves parceled out into commodities and their physical or chemical augmentation is resold to the consumer (Daub, 2006, p.141).
Providing an illustration from a television infomercial touting a tonic that promises to halt the aging process (which would effectively “cure death”) Daub’s uses this liminal case to parse out various ways in which conditions previously considered “natural,” have come to be classified as illnesses by Big Pharma while, contrariwise, some of Big Pharma’s critics have essentialized and argued for the preservation of certain illnesses deemed “meaningful” to personal identity (Daub, 2006, p.143).

Firstly, where aging is no longer considered a natural process but something that can and must be cured, the charlatanism seems all too apparent, if only as a preposterous extreme. Yet it raises the question, in how many less-obvious ways do normalcy and personhood become commodified components, “in a world in which,” Daub continues, “it is increasingly acceptable to have a corporation take part of your body, assess it, and tell you for what price they will normalize it” (Daub, 2006, pp.149-150)? Do the desires cultivated by the Pull strategy reflect a need to treat genuine medical concerns, or are people being manipulated to request drugs which at times may be unnecessary or at best, be only marginally better, perhaps even riskier, or disproportionately expensive when compared to other options? Indeed, ethicists might rightly interrogate the veracity of commercials that ask vaguely leading questions about common human physical or emotional states. These kinds of leading questions include: Do you find yourself feeling sad? Do you get lonely? Do you have trouble sleeping at night? If answered in the affirmative then, the advertisements inform, there is likely a medication that can treat the affliction, thus ostensibly holding out alleged cures for sadness, loneliness, and sleepless nights once and for all. Consumers are advised to visit their doctors and request it.
Therein lies the advantage of tethering feelings of human inadequacy to medically classifiable syndromes. Pull strategies veer further away from past marketing techniques when they seek to create new problems out of seemingly ordinary conditions that have not been addressed previously. One way of accomplishing this is by naming a syndrome based upon a collection of previously unlinked symptoms and then creating focus groups aimed at discussing the syndrome. Indeed, being “painfully shy” may now be a viewed as a potential symptom of a social phobia disorder. After a cursory search on shyness, Internet search engines readily provide websites and discussion groups addressing social phobia disorders. Once enough people become aware of a syndrome categorized by chronic or persistent shyness, or whatever syndrome they happen to exhibit characteristics of, they can easily request therapeutic treatment. On the Internet, suggested prescriptions are only a few mouse clicks away.13

Secondly, Daub identifies critical discourses in support of the view that it might make people feel better simply to know that a community of others “struggle” or “suffer” with a previously unrecognized condition, perhaps even giving them a sense of meaning in their lives against the backdrop of an outwardly indifferent or unsympathetic world, leading to such proclamations as, “I thought I was alone with x. But now there’s help” (Daub, 2006, p.143). Seemingly echoing Lipovetsky, they could be united by a common identification with a fashionable new syndrome that eventually becomes synonymous with a sense of personhood. There might seem to be little or no harm in that.

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13 Of course, it goes without saying that some forms of social disorders are extremely debilitating and new medications, or even just therapy groups, can be a life-altering godsend for those afflicted. The question at hand is whether or not the pharmaceutical industry is being overly zealous and manipulative in its efforts to problematize and then medicalize what were once considered “natural” or “normal” phenomena, for the purpose of financial gain.
Yet Daub is also quick to point out, and I believe correctly, that although the some of the language used by critics of the pharmaceutical industry appears to be appropriated from “left-wing liberation or empowerment movements,” it ultimately reverses into a rather conservative and traditionally essentialist discourse in which the human body is removed from the realm of nature, only to be re-inserted within the second nature power discourses of what Daub terms, “the sickness industry” (Daub, 2006, pp.142-147). These ostensibly authentic narratives of empowerment may in fact be unraveled by the very discourses used to support them. Not only is Big Pharma mining Internet discussion boards and online blogs for data, online and offline informational content is also being manufactured to appear prior to or seemingly independently of the drugs associated with them. Despite all of the appearances of being spontaneously emergent communities, a good number of them have associations with Big Pharma. Daub notes that:

GlaxoSmithKlein, for example, funded the “grass-roots” Social Anxiety Disorder Coalition (made up of three non-profits: the American Psychiatric Association, the Anxiety Disorders Association of America, and Freedom From Fear) exclusively to support its new antianxiety drug Paxil. Even the “personal” narratives often end up in a properly political arena (lobbying efforts to get the treatment covered by medical insurance or declared a disability, for instance) (Daub, 2006, p.143).

The question remains as to whether or not some of the pharmaceutical industry’s critics, who attest to the importance of recognizing certain illnesses or conditions as constitutive of personal identity, are actually playing right into the hands of those that they mean to contest.

Furthermore, even if the seductive language of advertisements really fools no one into thinking that there is a cure for any and all of life’s problems it appears as though there may be
few qualms about suggesting the limitless potential for developing treatments. That is, there might be more money to be made through subscription: first by getting the patient/consumer to adhere to the ideology that one has a given syndrome, and then by enticing them to demand access to the renewable prescriptions that continually treat, but never cure, the symptoms of that syndrome. Indeed, lifestyle drugs are currently the fastest growing segments driving pharmaceutical research and development despite being characterized as drugs, “which do not technically cure illnesses but instead aim to make various aspects of life less problematic” (Plunkett Research, Ltd., 2007). The ambiguity lies in determining what, in fact, is truly a problem and whether the costs and risks associated with lessening said problem outweigh the proposed benefits of treatment. What emerges is not the clear picture of autonomous individual choice and consumer awareness that was initially purported.

c. Seductive Practices Hold Out a False Promise of Freedom

Furthermore, as to the alleged freedom on societal scale that such practices are alleged to enhance, one need look little further than a classic textbook of example marketing sildenafil citrate to recognize the non-medical, and somewhat manipulative, motivations that can lie behind a pharmaceutical company’s goal to increase market share by directly appealing to a broader audience.

Sildenafil citrate, best known by the brand name Viagra, was initially developed by British scientists testing nitrous oxide as means of treating circulatory difficulties and pulmonary hypertension when it was also discovered to increase the flow and regularity of blood to the
penis (Karp, 2009, p.641). Prior to making the drug available to the public, Melody Peterson explains, the American pharmaceutical company Pfizer Incorporated, the largest research-based corporation of its kind, made strategic decisions to market the drug by designing the pill in a recognizable, “masculine blue hue and a unique diamond shape” and, even more unusually for a pharmaceutical company at the time, by purposely renaming the condition it would be treating:

Impotence, they believed, was an embarrassing term that men did not want to talk about. Instead, the company promoted Viagra as treating “erectile dysfunction” or simply ED. Pfizer then spent millions of dollars hiring celebrities to promote its new pill, beginning with the aging Bob Dole, who admitted to having sexual problems after prostate cancer surgery (Karp, 2009, pp.153-4).

The term “erectile dysfunction” (and its shorthand, “ED”) did indeed catch on with the public, even becoming standard in the medical literature, as did the drug Viagra itself with sales of $1.7 billion reported as early as 2003. Viagra’s success subsequently initiated two forms of imitation: efforts to develop similar drugs in order to tap into the ED market, and attempts to replicate the success of the masterful strategic marketing of prescription medication.

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14 This is the oft-reported explanation for the discovery of Viagra. In tracing, “trajectories both of the medicalization and demedicalization of sexuality” in the post-Viagra “sexuopharmaceutical era,” Leonore Tiefer observes that the story of Viagra emerged from Pfizer as a self-reported legend that may have overshadowed a number of lesser-known, and potential more controversial, accounts of its development and subsequent marketing. See “The Viagra Phenomenon,” Sexualities, 9(3), 2006, pp.273-294.

15 This figure is based on “official” prescriptions for roughly six million men that year, but does not include quantities accounting for “unofficial” purchases of black market Viagra sold via the Internet. See Peter Conrad, “The Shifting Engines of Medicalization” in the Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 46:1, 2005, pp. 3-14.
Indeed, from the position of the pharmaceutical corporations, the marketing of new pharmaceuticals seemingly became as important as their development. In addition to Viagra, nitrous oxide-based drugs such as Cialis (tadalafil) and Levitra (vardenafil) perform in comparable manners, with their primary differences being varying degrees of time to arousal and estimated performance times. Emphasizing the supreme importance of focus groups in marketing research, A. Parasuraman, Dhruv Grewal, and Ramayya Krishnan relate that when Bayer Pharmaceuticals Corporation and GlaxoSmithKline turned to focus groups to determine how best to introduce Levitra, their treatment for erectile dysfunction, in seeking ways to compete with Viagra by finding weaknesses in Pfizer’s marketing plan they learned, perhaps surprisingly, that despite its success:

…consumers were not connecting well with Viagra’s intended image. Viagra was perceived as an old man's drug for sexual problems even though Pfizer had been using younger celebrities to lure middle-aged men. For many group participants, the product’s blue color was “too cool” in appearance, and they equated the color with being sick. The research revealed that middle-aged men do not want to admit their sexual problems and therefore do not consult doctors. These revelations from the focus groups conveyed a powerful message: Bayer should bring out a product that not only is at least as effective as Viagra, but also conveys a healthier, warmer image, especially to middle-aged men. Bayer should also position the product in the broadest possible terms as a remedy for a quality-of-life issue. These insights helped shape the positioning and promotional strategy for Levitra (Parasuraman, Grewal, and Krishnan, 2007, p.189).
Although one might think that a therapeutically superior erectile-dysfunction medication would essentially “sell itself” in that physicians would prescribe the most effective option for their patients, as this example makes clear, the designers of strategic marketing plans are frequently concerned with broadly promoting a perceived image to as wide an audience as possible, as much if not more than, they are with medical effectiveness. By marketing a pleasing color and healthy image aimed to appeal directly to end users, the need for a physician’s expert advice seems all but eliminated. Pharmaceutical companies aren’t limited to selling drugs that meet the medical needs of a large section of the population; they can also sell a lifestyle, and in so doing, create a demand for pharmaceuticals-as-products which the patient-as-consumer will assist in “pulling” through the channels of distribution. As such, it becomes a very seductive strategic maneuver.

Of concern to bioethicists is where the line is to be drawn between the promise of scientific progress and a certain amount of marketed disingenuous. For example, Pfizer also came to recognize Viagra’s image problems as well as the added potential for increasing profits by reaching more potential users with their marketing efforts. Pfizer’s response, according to Melody Peterson, was:

To expand the market to younger and healthier men, Pfizer later hired thirty-seven-year-old Rafael Palmeiro, the first baseman for the Texas Rangers. With the hiring of Palmeiro in 2002, the theme of the Viagra campaign became one about enhancing performance, whether on the baseball field or in bed. It had little to do with treating a medical condition. Viagra soon joined McDonald's and Coca-Cola on the list of the world's most recognizable brand names (Peterson, 2010, p.154).
Indeed, with marketing efforts now so removed from the original condition that the drugs are designed to treat, how many men, especially “younger,” “healthier” men, can in fact be said to need medication for erectile dysfunction, or even truly benefit from it, has become a contentious topic. In a similar manner to the way in which Daub draws on Adorno to discuss the abolition of good health and the rise of the sickness industry, Barbara L. Marshall argues that a “post-Viagra ‘men’s health’ industry” has emerged in which naturally aging men are bombarded by cultural messages linking sexual virility and masculinity, to the detriment of their psychological wellbeing (Marshall, 2008, pp.22-23). Moreover, Marshall contends, this “medicalization of masculinity” does indeed appear to be deployed toward ever younger audiences, under the guise of “sexual health”:

It was not until sexuality came to be viewed as the key to men's midlife problems in the late twentieth century that the male menopause, or andropause, was reconceptualized as a medical condition. In the post-Viagra climate, with its intentionally heightened public awareness of the risk of sexual decline with aging, the notion of andropause as a widespread "disorder" now circulates through the scientific literature, the clinic, and the general public by way of citation, marketing, and mass media (Marshall, 2008, p.23).

Given this perceived, if perhaps undeserved, credibility, any sign of reduced sexual performance, function, or even desire, even if experienced only on occasion, can thus be conjoined not only to a crisis of masculinity, but also to serious health risks. The newly-created perception of need drives the demand which in turn is conveniently met by the promise of the pharmaceutical industry.
How well the pharmaceutical industry actually makes good on its promise, however, is contestable and may say more about prevailing attitudes toward sex than anything else. Research conducted by Zoe Barnett, Sofia Robledo-Gomez, and Nancy Pachana indicates that interpersonal realities and the, “social and psychological aspects of treatment,” as well as patients’ partners, are typically “absent from the majority of research” on Viagra (Barnett, Robledo-Gomez, and Pachana, 2012). Examining this trend of medicalizing male sexuality, Barry McCarthy and Maria Thestrup contend that sex difference plays a key role in how sexual dysfunction is treated, with males typically receiving physical, pharmaceutical-orientated approaches and females receiving emotional, psychologically-oriented approaches (McCarthy and Thestrup, 2009, p.589). This schism, McCarthy and Thestrup illustrate, is rooted less in evidence of biological distinctions so much as in differences in developmental socialization in societies that have typically rewarded young male sexual prowess and promiscuity while penalizing young females for engaging in the same behaviors (McCarthy and Thestrup, 2009, p.589).

Reinforcing essentialist tropes, heterosexual women come to be viewed as being dependent upon intimate interaction in order to experience sexual satisfaction while heterosexual men, by contrast, are regarded as beings who are always at the ready for sexual encounters even to the extent that they do, “not need anything from a woman in order to experience desire, arousal, and orgasm” (McCarthy and Thestrup, 2009, p.589). In this way, men are conditioned to adhere to a hyper-masculine ideal of sexual frequency and performance that is physical in nature, a socialization practice that consequently lends itself to pharmaceutical approaches to any perceived variations from this ideal.
However, case studies appear to indicate that, to the contrary, when changes in performance occur which are in fact related to emotional or psychological factors, and are then often neglected, pharmacological approaches not only fail to solve the problem, they actually make matters worse by compounding the issue with feelings of frustration and failure. Consequently, McCarthy and Thstrup argue for a psychobiosocial approach, which moves away from the quick-fix mentality frequently associated with ED drugs and instead asserts that the primary, “challenge for men and couples is to integrate intimacy and eroticism into their relationships. This includes adopting the ‘Good-Enough Sex’ model rather than clinging to the perfect intercourse model” (McCarthy and Thstrup, 2009, p.593). At the end of the day, by breaking away from the stigmas perpetuated by the pharmaceutical industry, men stand a better chance of overcoming sexual difficulties when they are able to view a sexual partner as someone with whom they share an experience rather than someone for which they are expected to perform.

Furthermore, although physicians can and do prescribe Viagra to women, Pfizer’s research on sildenafil has up till now been declared inconclusive with regard to its overall effectiveness in females (Mayor, 2004). Yet for good or ill, exactly why a female-oriented equivalent to Viagra has lagged behind the development of male-focused drugs has also begun to garner critical consideration. Given the pervasiveness of biological essentialism in the dominant narratives of sexual dysfunction, it seems difficult to ignore the effects of social conditioning toward conventional, heteronormative gender roles in regard to female sexuality. In one example, on the generally well-respected Mayo Clinic’s Internet medical resource site, Jacqueline M. Thielen, M.D., in addressing why the FDA has not approved any medications for
treating sexual arousal problems in women, provides reasons which appear markedly slanted toward emotional, psychologized explanations:

Female sexual response is complex. For most women, simply addressing difficulties with arousal may not get to the actual problem — which is often a lack of sexual desire. Many factors can influence a woman's sexual desire. For example:

Many women find that the stresses of daily life deplete their desire for sex. Highs and lows in sexual desire may coincide with the beginning or end of a relationship or major life changes, such as pregnancy or menopause.

For some women, orgasm can be elusive — causing concerns or preoccupations that lead to a loss of interest in sex.

Desire is often connected to a woman's sense of intimacy with her partner, as well her past experiences. Over time, psychological troubles can contribute to biological problems and vice versa.

Some chronic conditions, such as diabetes or multiple sclerosis, can alter a woman's sexual-response cycle — causing changes in arousal or orgasmic response (Thielen, accessed 2013, http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/viagra-for-women/AN01987).

Despite being anecdotal, and making brief mention of biological and pathological connections, these answers are nonetheless revealing in their tendency toward privileging an emotional, psychological approach to women’s sexuality as was described in the research of McCarthy and Thstrup, among others.
Likewise, with the development of Lybrido, a drug intended to increase sexual desire in women, a New York Times article reports that when the ability to achieve orgasm is less of a problem than sexual interest or arousal, the drug would need to go beyond physiological changes alone because:

Viagra meddles with the arteries; it causes physical shifts that allow the penis to rise. A female-desire drug would be something else. It would adjust the primal and executive regions of the brain. It would reach into the psyche (Bergner, 2013).

On the surface, it appears as though the author actively attempts to challenge claims to biological essentialism by pointing out that men also require sexual desire for Viagra to be effective and that both biometric and quantitative survey results indicate strong physical responses in women taking Lybrido. However, the article nonetheless underscores essentialism by asserting that a man’s desire is still more likely to be mainly as a matter of physical stimulation while a woman’s is more frequently discussed in terms of unlocking her psyche (not just brain, but mind) and tied to feelings of intimacy in a what is presumed to be both a physical and emotional relationship. With unintentional irony, the same article relates that when Tuieten, a leading scientist developing Lybrido, was unceremoniously discarded by his first love, “The breakup inspired a lifelong quest to comprehend female emotion through biochemistry…There became a need for me to understand my personal life in this way”” (Bergner, 2013). Like Odysseus and the Sirens, the female portrayed as radical Other is once again retained as part of a scientific quest to understand the perpetual mysteries of eros. By appearing factual and validated by well-known clinics, physicians, and news sources, contrasting these examples with the previous discussion of
marketing Viagra suggests that there is more to the categorization of “sexual dysfunction” than one that is solely defensible by appealing to scientific advancement for support.

Thus, what I have aimed to make evident are a number of points which challenge assertions that the actions of Big Pharma, in employing a Pull-Push marketing approach to patients-as-consumers, are part of a completely progressive scientific narrative in which their products always result in improving human health and well-being with no significant evidence of deception or harmful consequences, be they intentional or unintentional. First, whereas it has been claimed that the American capitalist, “for-profit” system is what spurs innovative research and development that thus indirectly subsidizes medical research for the rest of the world, it is also important to keep in mind examples such as sildenafil, a drug with massive sales which was initially developed in a nation that allows for profit but which also has regulations to control prices and keep medications affordable. The involvement of the U.S.-based corporation, Pfizer, came in later stages with an emphasis on distribution. Viagra has since reached unprecedented levels of marketing saturation, creating a spectacle for a prescription drug that, according to the New York Times, was commanding a price of approximately twenty-five dollars per pill as of 2013.\(^\text{16}\)

Secondly, although the claim that this competitive environment fuels greater improvements in existing drugs is not entirely false, as the relatively meager differences between

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\(^{16}\) In the same article, the New York Times also reported that the next strategic move for Pfizer would be to reduce profits lost to counterfeiting as well as eliminate the need for a pharmacy visit by distributing Viagra directly to consumers from its corporate website. See Katie Thomas, “Facing Black Market, Pfizer Is Looking Online to Sell Viagra,” The New York Times, May 6, 2013.
Viagra, Levitra, and Cialis indicate, such differences are sometimes marginal in the grand scheme of medical advancement. Yet the costs associated with developing them, not to mention the prices that they sometimes command, can be substantial.

In conjunction with the previous point, and more difficult to discern but no less troubling, are the opportunity costs incurred to human health as a result of de-incentivizing research on more serious illnesses that affect smaller populations and so have a decreased potential for equally high levels of return on investment. In comparison, there may simply be greater profit potential in developing so-called “lifestyle drugs” than in curing rare or difficult to treat diseases.17

Lastly, in addition to how much is spent on research for non-necessary, lifestyle drugs—many of which are aimed at treating recently problematized, cosmetic conditions such as baldness or wrinkles—a tremendous amount of financial capital is spent on the marketing of drugs alone. Despite the seductive allure of the advertisements, these drugs may or may not live up to their promised potential. The investment in a drug’s perceived “success” on the market might also lead researchers and physicians to systematically ignore key factors in researching the underlying causes of various conditions, be they viewed as somatic, psychological, or socially

17 This speaks to a general likelihood and not necessarily a rule in every instance. Even cures for relatively rare diseases have some profit potential and high ones at that if price points can be set well above costs. Also, cures or therapeutic treatments for widespread diseases or conditions could outperform lifestyle drugs. My purpose isn’t to deny this, but rather to call attention to the amount of resources being allocated to develop lifestyle drugs (or any named brand, patented, financially successful drug) that are only minor improvements over existing drugs as a counterexample to claims that the free market, for profit economy leads always fosters medical innovation and advancement.
constructed. This can result in routine over-prescription. In this regard, the purpose of my consideration of the commodification of psychosexual health and the medicalization of masculinity as considered within the broader context of sex and gender has been to advance my overall project of tracing seductive mechanisms that may originate in unjust conceptual domination yet still play out in very real, tangible ways via the intersections of both physical and sociopolitical bodies.

Consequently, together these factors demonstrate that the intersectionality of paradigm shifts in strategic marketing and an increased respect for patient autonomy do not support a solely progressive narrative guaranteeing either unequivocal scientific advancement or the realization of an embodied freedom with regard to patient choice and self-directed better health. More convincing, furthermore, is the evidence of industry pressures to ensure the financial resources allocated to pharmaceutical marketing prove profitable, which can offset resources available for research as well as affect the problematizing and classification of various conditions. What is idiosyncratic about this change is the way in which this amalgamation of research and marketing has led to increased medicalization. Overmedicalization can be a form of harmful domination, and the risk of it increases dramatically when standard practice entails relying on the creation of individual demands for access to pharmaceuticals that are seductively dangled in front of the masses as panaceas for a host of continually-created new conditions and syndromes. The debatable increases in freedom of medical self-determination and choice are, it seems, ultimately outweighed by the troubling evidence of manipulation.

(v) Embodied Freedom is not Simply the Ability to Make Choices
Forewarned by Adorno and Horkheimer’s writings on commodification, it seems as though the pharmaceutical industry in the United States has begun to experience a reversal in logic. It exhibits a tendency toward mass-market fungibility driven not only by what is typically painted by critics as the greed of Big Pharma, but also by American citizens who persist in asserting their right to autonomy over and against paternalistic regulation, even as this freedom and capacity for legitimate choice is diminished by their own complicit, insistence on maintaining the *status quo*. Yet to focus primarily on this complicity, to the exclusion of the machinations of control that elicit it, essentially amounts to blaming the victim. That is, it appears to place the burden of responsibility for whatever ensues upon the shoulders of the ones who took the bait, and not the ones who set the trap. This is ethically problematic.

Moreover, privileging this notion of uncoerced volition as directly informing responsibility fails to adequately attend to the distinct apparatus at work. The paradigm shift in the pharmaceutical industry is but one scenario that demonstrates how commodification as a seductive practice is increasingly intersecting with embodied experience. It has been shown that life and health can be problematized in a vast array of ways, and it can be extremely difficult at times to discern hard fact from attractive fiction. In a society mired in seduction and the promotion of the ephemeral individuals are, to a great degree, caught within an administered society in which they have relatively little influence. Yet as I have previously discussed, although forced coercion is generally accepted as ethically wrong in most cases, seduction is a much more nebulous concept with which ethicists must grapple.

This is why it is useful to appeal to Adorno for a more nuanced conception of freedom. It is crucial to remember that, for Adorno, freedom has less to do with rational volition in the
traditional sense so much as it involves the recognition of all the possible contingencies available. As he states, “Freedom would be not to choose between black and white but to abjure such prescribed choices” (MM, §86, p.132). This is not to say that freedom is a matter of chance, or that all judgment should be suspended in favor of ethical relativism. For although it is seemingly impossible, in a world characterized by ethical ambiguity or even outright falsehood, to determine singular, right actions that can be applied to every conceivable situation, there still exists the possibility of a negative ethic which continually seeks to minimize the amount of harm possible. In other words, on Adorno’s view, there might not be a definitive right or wrong action to be ascertained in every situation and the circumstances of a highly commodified existence does contaminate ethical agency to some degree (ND, p.243). However, even in a highly commodified, administered world, in a given situation there is likely a better or worse course of action that can be undertaken.

Admittedly, individuals alone are often so disempowered by the administered world that they are unable to effect lasting change on their own (ND, p.243).18 A sustained resistance to whatever clouds or pulls individuals and groups toward those totalizing forces thus falls squarely at the collective feet of applied ethicists, for they can frequently expose and challenge existing structures of unjust domination in forums that can lead to practical policy and legislative modifications.

18 This is not to say that individuals who are not ethicists cannot, do not, or should not attempt to make important ethical decisions. What Adorno seems to be implying here is how difficult it can be to effect change in isolation and without any kind of unified guidance other than what is being manufactured by the Culture Industry while living a highly commodified, administered existence. Moreover, Adorno is clear in this section of Negative Dialectics that inaction leaves one no less tainted by the system itself.
This is by no means a simple task, and critical reflection can be tenuous at times. One compelling metric of measure to which ethicists can appeal is suffering. As Adorno states, “The need to let suffering speak is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject” (ND, pp.17–18). Yet even here ethicists must be vigilant against false claims that allege to alleviate or “cure” all suffering, particularly when running the risk of merely promoting or re-inscribing inaccurately progressive narratives that uncritically assume their own value and ethical justification. It is a process that not only calls for reflection, but also ongoing re-reflection.

To summarize, then: drawing on Adorno’s aesthetic writings as a starting point for critique provided a methodological framework from which to begin a speculative examination of bioethics, the pharmaceutical industry, and commodification as a seduction practice. By identifying tensions between freedom and control, it became possible to examine what is lost, covered up, or otherwise neglected in the seemingly progressive narrative of pharmaceutical research and development. The findings are not meant to be interpreted either as a vilification of the pharmaceutical industry or as a rejection of the pharmaceuticals they produce— including those discussed here— as though they have not provided any benefits whatsoever. The popularity of Viagra alone seems to refute the latter possibility. What it does demonstrate, however, is the way in which unchallenged progressive narratives often elide ethically relevant factors which would otherwise appear inimical to their claims. The next step will be to consider the future direction of bioethics. For this, attention will be turned toward one of today’s most scientifically promising research efforts, the mapping of the human genome.
In examining research on the human genome as a narrative on the exploration of what is termed “druggable space,” I will employ a method of immanent critique in conjunction with the Postcolonial technique of recognizing colonization as both an actuality and an aesthetic, symbolic narrative that has substantial ethical implications. To begin, it will be useful to revisit Agamben’s elaboration on the *homo sacer* as a paradigmatic figure that is emblematic of totalitarian domination and the loss of individual freedom in order to establish how human bodies are becoming increasingly caught within mechanisms of domination and oppression, and in ways that have not been adequately recognized by ethicists as being connected to seduction.

(vi) Articulating the Demand: Sanctioning Seductive Practices Can Contribute to the Unjust Domination of One’s Self and Others

In Agamben’s discussion of the *homo sacer*, a figure reduced to bare life is trapped by sovereign laws paradoxically authorizing the suspension of the law, a condition which he argues is not the exception to the rule, as one might initially think, but which instead has become the paradigmatic, biopolitical organizing structure in contemporary society (HS, p.181). As an illustration of how the sovereign ban functions Agamben employs the European myth of the werewolf, an animalized semi-human that is expelled from the city and able to be killed at will with impunity. \(^{19}\) It describes a relationship of abandonment in which, “the ban can signify both the insignia of sovereignty… and expulsion from the community” (HS, pp.110-111). Given how readily bare life can be relegated to this ban, it seems perilously effortless to render others, even those merely exhibiting a generalized alterity to societal norms, as something less than human.

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\(^{19}\) There are a number of “werewolf” myths and similar legends in various cultures and eras, but Agamben is primarily appealing to a specific European folklore tradition.
Any assumed notion of inalienable human rights is effectively eliminated. For Agamben, therefore, it is imperative that these structures be recognized and called out at every turn, in whatever forms they are made manifest in operation (HS, p.111).

What is striking about these types of structures is that their totalitarianism does not necessarily commence with a distinctly coercive act. To the contrary, they often proceed as a response to fear, which might have been initiated by the sovereign power, but it might just as well have originated elsewhere. For example, in a typical, coercive model of fascist domination and totalitarian oppression, a sovereign power elicits fear by putting forth a threat that demands compliance, or else the force behind the threat will be exerted, leaving subjects little or no choice but to acquiesce. Yet quite often, members of a group or society first perceive of a threat that seemingly did not originate with the sovereign power.\textsuperscript{20} Then, out of fear, they turn to the sovereign, usually governmental power and \textit{demand} protection. In so doing, they hope to have the threat expelled, which would ostensibly allow them to live more safely and to go freely about their lives. However, Agamben has argued that this increasingly involves the suspension of law as it is generally understood, including many protections or provisions for human rights, in order to bring about greater safety from the perceived outside threat. Yet by willingly capitulating to the practice, and indeed \textit{demanding} it, they may actually be subjecting themselves to greater danger as they too become exposed to such exceptions and suspension of the rules of law.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} The word “seemingly” is important here because the threat still might have originated there, or been purposely drafted for use in manipulation, publicity, propaganda, etc., even if it is not always clearly evident.

\textsuperscript{21} In \textit{State of Exception}, Agamben provides the extended example of the terrorist attacks of 9-11-2001 and the subsequent passage of the U.S. Patriot Act on November 24, 2001 in response to them. The Patriot Act allows for the indefinite detention of any person, regardless of citizenship, as well as a host of other provisions that grant the
Again, this is not the “push” structure of a typically coercive model, in which the elicitation of fear leads to a forced action that is deemed involuntary as a result of having little or no real choice. Rather, it seems to mimic a “pull” structure in which, paradoxically, in the name of increasing safety and protecting freedom, individuals become complicit in demanding increased risk while also limiting the autonomy of themselves and others by broadly constraining freedom. As in cases of commodification, then, it shares a corresponding logical mechanism of seduction, which increases ethical ambiguity and makes interpreting the situation less clear-cut.

The ethical ambiguity created by this demand in no way lessens the persuasiveness of Agamben’s imperative to expose these oppressive mechanisms, but it does mean having to acknowledge the significant role that the demand can play in their identification, as well as the ethical implications that could follow. Agamben already attests to a certain amount of fluidity in how these structures materialize, and he employs the metaphor of the werewolf to exemplify a potential transformation back to human form, such that he or she becomes a permanent, but nevertheless animalized, not-entirely-human, resident of a state characterized by marginalized suspension of the rights of due process for those suspected of involvement in terrorist activities or association with terrorist groups. The stated intention of the Act was to increase citizen safety and homeland security. However, Agamben and other critics contend that it places nearly all individuals at greater risk of harm, since although its effect on terrorism is debatable, it infringes upon allegedly protected, sacrosanct freedoms and prohibits everyone who is accused of terrorist activity from numerous evidence gathering safeguards and the ability to legally defend oneself by having suitable access to counsel and representation. Lacking the recognized status of either citizen or criminal, as in the case of the homo sacer, everyone accused is indefinitely caught within the ban. See Agamben’s *State of Exception*, Kevin Attell, translator. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.
exception (HS, pp.106-109). Not unlike life caught between the narratives of nature and technology that characterizes Adorno’s administered life, Agamben points not only to the externalization of sovereign violence and oppression but also to its internalization:

And if in modernity life is more and clearly placed at the center of State politics (which now becomes, in Foucault’s terms, biopolitics), if in our age all citizens can be said, in a specific but extremely real sense, to appear virtually as *hominis sacri*, this is possible only because the relation of ban has constituted the essential structure of sovereign power from the beginning (HS, p.111).

Constituting the biopolitical subject, the powers that be play out on and in the human body. Therefore, as similarly called for by Adorno, if unjust domination ensues then these mechanisms must be resisted, even if they cannot always be eliminated entirely.

For Agamben, change will require a reformation of ethics that takes into account singularity as well as a reconsideration of community. Yet what is central to my project here is

22 In this way one can never be fully “inside” society so as to be truly protected or completely “outside” of it and thus free from its long-reaching effects.

23 Although Agamben acknowledges the significance of Foucault’s biopolitical playing field where the subjugation of the body becomes a territory of power and control, he remains unconvinced that Foucault devised an adequate plan for change. Thus, Agamben formulated his own response later in *The Coming Community*. As Leland de la Durantaye explains, “In his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno proclaimed that ‘a true preponderance of the particular would not be attainable except by changing the universal’ (Adorno 1973, p.313). It is at this point of philosophical convergence- where the particular and the universal would be ‘changed’- that Agamben begins “*The Coming Community*” (p.161). De la Durantaye, L. *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.
the recognition of sociopolitical forces acting on life in a way that has become increasingly internalized within individual bodies but, according to Foucault, can also be externalized on a wider scale to include all members of a population (Foucault, 1997, p. 242). That is to say, bodies in this Foucauldian sense can be defined either as human bodies or as political bodies, depending on the context. It should be noted that in addition to the influence of the State’s power on the body, I maintain that the same mechanisms of domination can apply to the non-governmental structures of the highly commodified, administered life to which I have been referring. Moreover, my work remains focused on the demand within the general model of Agamben’s *homo sacer* instead of specifically concentrating on Foucault’s work because, as thinkers such as Roy Boyne have suggested, due to the degree to which “mechanisms of seduction” have come into prominence, certain Foucauldian structures of power, such as panopticism and surveillance, may be rendered somewhat outmoded in their ability to address widespread seductive practices (Boyne, 2002, pp.293-294). Agamben’s formulation of the *homo sacer*, however, is in many ways an updated extension of Adorno’s work that opens up a space to consider seduction via the articulation of this demand. It also presents the prospect of investigating what this could mean for ethicists wishing to combat susceptibility to oppressive ideologies.

a. **Susceptibility to Oppressive Ideologies Can be Exposed and Resisted**

The predominance of research and development and direct to consumer marketing of lifestyle drugs is just one example of how a Pull strategy in marketing intersects with human health and embodied freedom. Stemming from a perceived need or inadequacy, and sometimes

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24 I wouldn’t reject them summarily, but addressing these concerns in relation to Foucault’s work would be another project altogether and hence, beyond the scope of this project.
one that has been manufactured by the pharmaceutical industry, individuals are presented with
the promise of a solution to their problems. Out of this desire, members of the public come to
demand satisfaction in the form of prescriptions. Individuals assume that they are merely
exercising choice, increasing their knowledge and options, and exerting greater control over their
own lives. Sometimes the treatment is effective, but there is no guarantee that a drug will live up
to its initial promise and results are often mixed or complicated by side-effects, which
themselves are sometimes systematically devalued and highly detrimental to one’s health.

Furthermore, from an ethical standpoint, this is not just a matter of isolated, individual
choice that affects no one but the individual making it. As has been shown, the demand for these
“choices” in competitive, for-profit pharmaceutical markets influences what is developed,
marketed, and prescribed/sold in a system framed by limited resources and unequal resource
distribution.\textsuperscript{25} This could determine who gets treated, for what, and under what circumstances,
with little recourse for those who are disenfranchised.\textsuperscript{26} In a market-driven system marked by

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\item \textsuperscript{25} The unequal distribution of scarce resources, even in regard to medical care, is not necessarily unjust but it can be, and inequity is often a strong material indicator of injustice and sometimes suffering.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Historically, this has functioned in different ways. For example, severe birth defects related to the anti-nausea drug Thalidomide in the late 1950’s to early 1960’s resulted in a public outcry and “demand” for more stringent drug testing policies. After these went into effect, drug testing regulations in the U.S. became more rigorous and inflexible. Later, as Michael D. Greenberg explains, when the HIV/AIDS crisis developed in the 1980s, many in the public became frustrated with the time required to get experimental treatments through the approval pipeline, and the “demand” then became one of loosening regulations and FDA controls to get drugs to patients faster in order to reduce suffering. The response was still disappointingly slow (and medications sometimes still remained unaffordable to many throughout the world), but eventually some improvements in the time frame were made, However, this has led to new concerns as to whether some of this de-regulation has gone too far, once again
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high commodification, the emphasis on determining an exchange value for as many things as possible, including previously unquantified aspects of human life, runs an exceptionally high risk of excluding those with legitimate, perhaps life-threatening needs. Hence, the ethical implications are more ambiguous than in clear cases of coercion.

Given this ambiguity, ethicists meaning to effect change must approach cases differently than when there is an identifiable perpetrator and a completely non-complicit victim. Again, however, one caveat to keep in mind is that, in regard to seduction, the commodified system is such that participation in it neither exonerates an individual of all complicity nor does it justify “victim blaming” by reducing all acts to the impetus of autonomous volition. The distinct purpose here is to recognize and expose such mechanisms so as to either dismantle them or to successfully empower individuals to avoid them in the future. This will not be possible in all situations. Still, as the machinations of creating the “demand” and the ramifications that follow become more familiar, various forms of seductive manipulation can be more steadfastly resisted.

In many respects, then, the ethical application of these principles should be future-oriented. As this project has moved from considering the intersection of commodification and the body via fashion to the physical commodification of the health care industry, it becomes

resulting in drugs which are unnecessarily hurried to market, increasing patient risk as well as confusion over which treatments are most efficacious. See Greenburg, *Aids, Experimental Drug Approval, and the FDA’s New Drug Screening Process*. Buffalo, New York: William S. Hein & Co, 1999.

Indeed, I want to be clear that recognizing complicity in the demand is not the same as asserting that those who are harmed or disenfranchised in some way are to be held responsible for wrongdoing of offences against them, or that the end result should be absolving perpetrators by “letting them off the hook,” so to speak.
apparent that the structures of commodification seem to be gradually encroaching ever further into the internal realms of the body. Consider, for example, the burgeoning science of genomics.

Strictly speaking, genomics is not a particularly new field of study. With roots traceable as far back to early experiments on heredity in fruit flies, it has long since become a source of ethical discussion ranging from notorious instances such as the lethal, deplorable acts of Nazi Germany’s racialized eugenics to reinvigorated, contemporary debates surrounding such issues as “designer DNA” babies, genetic screening for diseases, and stem cell research for regenerative therapies, to name a few. Situated within this lineage of scientific research, the Human Genome Project (HGP) was an international research endeavor spanning thirteen years (1990-2003) that represented the largest scale effort ever undertaken to map and interpret all human genes. Although it yielded mixed results, and ultimately fell short of some of its more ambitious goals, the outcomes of the HGP were nonetheless scientifically monumental and continue to inform ongoing genetic research. Given its scope and influence, it presents a compelling starting place for a speculative consideration of the future direction of bioethics.

(vii) Druggable Space: The Final Frontier?

In regard to emergent technologies, the Human Genome Project has been widely hailed for its groundbreaking efforts to unlock the genetic underpinnings that potentially lie beneath thousands of diseases. A genome denotes a complete set of DNA, ninety-nine percent of which is the same for all humans and with the remaining one percent contributing to individual variants that define such physical features as hair and eye color, how tall one will become, and the probability of contracting certain illnesses. Mapping, or whole genome sequencing, plots the

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28 These examples are by no means meant to represent an exhaustive list.
specific ordering of the bases for genomic structures and identifies linkages between them. By working to distinguish approximately 25,000 genes and sequencing over three billion chemical base pairs in human DNA, the legacy of the HGP is already one of greater understanding and the detection of genetic mutations and other hereditary markers as well as new medical breakthroughs in treating or curing a number of genetically-based diseases (Cummings, 14-16).

Another noteworthy scientific track foregrounded by the HGP is advanced research into “druggability.” Druggability examines small molecules in order to establish, “the likelihood of being able to modulate a target with a small-molecule drug,” which is critical, Joanna Owens maintains, to:

… determining whether a drug discovery project progresses from 'hit' to 'lead'. With only 10% of the human genome representing druggable targets, and only half of those being relevant to disease, it is important to be able to predict how druggable a novel target is in early drug discovery (Owens, 2007, p.187).29

That is, by recognizing druggable spaces, it becomes possible to identify molecular protein targets that can be altered as well as therapeutically benefit from chemical intervention. It also reduces time and costs in drug development. The expectation is that continued druggability research will lead to increased efficiency and effectiveness for new and improved therapies, as well as provide greater insight into how seemingly dissimilar target families relate to each other (Hambly, Danzer, Muskal, and Debe, 2000, p.279). The expanding field of pharmacogenomics, which seeks to determine how individual reactions to drugs are affected by genetic variation, is

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29 In drug development protocols, a “hit” refers to a compound that appears promising and worthy of study, whereas a “lead” is further distinguished from a set of “hit” compounds on the basis of having pronounced efficacy or specificity.
therefore also greatly indebted to the HGP. Taken altogether, then, the HGP and the further research it has made possible represents a watershed moment of scientific innovation.

Yet even from the start, the HGP was not met with unilateral enthusiasm or acceptance from bioethicists. The project suggests a myriad of ethical issues to be considered, including but not limited to: renewed concerns about harmful eugenics, potential use as a weapon of genetic warfare, privacy and biometric ownership concerns, and discrimination in employment or by health insurance companies. Nonetheless, even as bioethicists began tackling these issues early on, the nascent technologies pointed toward an optimistic future where diseases could at best be averted or at least be detected to some reliable degree of probability, sooner and with greater accuracy than ever before. Given its potential, bioethicists have tended to focus less on the mechanics of methodology and more on the implications of the research, such as the permissibility or impermissibility of certain applications, confidentiality and acceptable information management policies, and the development and implementation of best practice guidelines to follow with regard to genetic counseling. The last area in particular has received a good deal of attention, as bioethicists anticipate an expanding population of individuals seeking genetic testing in order to create potential disease and susceptibility profiles. Genetic counseling thus reopens the debate between respect for patient autonomy and paternalist concerns with regard to how much information should be provided to a patient, especially when degrees of predictive certitude vary.30

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30 Significant work in this area has been gathered into edited collections by Dianne M. Bartels, Bonnie S. Leroy, and Arthur L. Caplan.
Despite the valuable contributions that bioethicists have been making, however, I believe that this ongoing work should still be augmented by additional critical reflection, particularly on the research methodologies and how they might factor into shaping the potential ethical and social implications with regard to how the data is interpreted. For again, if the paradigm shift that I have been arguing for is as pervasive as it seems, then further examination of the HGP’s largely progressive, and somewhat seductive, narrative could provide a richer and more sophisticated understanding of the mechanisms in play.

One useful approach for this endeavor can be found in the literature and methodology of Postcolonial critique, which often employs a dialectic that aims to recover the negative, or the elements that are forgotten or overlooked, within the structures of dominant narratives. Postcolonialism’s abundant lineage includes a history of illuminating the relationship between maps and colonizing forces that makes it especially well-suited for application to the narratives surrounding the Human Genome Project. In putting forth my speculative consideration, however, I acknowledge at the outset that arguments by analogy are subject to the limitations of comparative dissimilarity. Nonetheless, comparable to the philosophical thought experiment, Postcolonial critique provides an additional methodological instrument for conducting dialectic, conceptual investigations. In many ways it parallels the methodology called for by Adorno, while still remaining flexible to changes across a variety of disciplines.

a. Examining Dominant Narratives to Expose the Threat of Unjust Domination

31 Feminist thought, Queer theory, Disability Studies, and Critical Race Theory often employ similar methodological approaches as well, and at times they intersect, i.e. “a Postcolonial Feminist” and so forth.
When considering dominant narratives, what chiefly distinguishes the Postcolonial philosopher from other philosophers is that the Postcolonialist specifically aims to recognize and expose the basic structures of colonizing mechanisms in order to halt or avert their replication in the present and future. The narrative analogy to colonization that can be recognized in mapping the human genome, I argue, is that if something (any “x”) can be mapped, then a claim can be made upon it. Furthermore, if a claim can be made upon “x” then it can be colonized. In other words, it can and perhaps likely will be, systematically inscribed with the values of the colonizers, while at the same time potentially ignoring or repressing that which falls outside of the colonizers’ interests.

There is no shortage of examples indicating that colonization and systematic forgetting seem to go hand in hand. Dating back to the Roman empire, terra nullius (“empty land” or “no one’s land”) was a term used to describe a presumed right to assume sovereignty upon discovering uninhabited, previously unclaimed territory. One the most well-known examples of terra nullius in the modern era can be found in the example of the colonization of Australia, in which British sovereignty was imposed over and above the unrecognized rights and laws of the indigenous inhabitants. By declaring terra nullius, the British settlers denied more than the physical presence of aboriginal peoples but also their perceived “civility,” or standing as human beings equally deserving of ethical consideration, as well as being capable and deserving by birthright of legal ownership of the land they and their ancestors had lived on for centuries. This of course had a ripple effect of restricting rights, educational and employment opportunities, freedom, and more. Trapped indefinitely within the machinations of a structure they neither asked for nor welcomed, the effects of terra nullius have been so devastating and long-lasting
that they still persist in various forms of unjust domination, prejudicial bias, and other inequalities today.

Australia is but one example among many, but the totalizing structure of colonization is nearly the same in each case. In the conquering of a “new” land, indigenous peoples are frequently de-humanized and eliminated or pressed into overt slavery. Others may be subjected to indirect forms of enslavement or social oppression, including through institutionalized practices aimed at “civilizing” what is perceived as savage or barbarian. The civilization process is coercive in that the colonizing agent generally determines the official language, crafts the laws and cultural norms to be followed, and sets societal values that are to be idealized and emulated. The colonizing agent takes what it wants or can use and claims that as its own, whereas everything (and everyone) else is either actively oppressed or systematically forgotten. Disturbingly, this discriminatory and unjust process is often viewed by its perpetrators as being morally praiseworthy, as it implicitly and uncritically assumes a paternalist stance that the “uncivilized” are, out of the goodness of the colonizers’ hearts, being aided and educated on how they can and ought to live better. In considering terra nullius and colonization in relation to mapping out territory and sovereignty, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin describe, it becomes apparent how the act of mapping can function as an allegorical, typically Euro-centric, tool of exploitation in which the cartographer writes, and thus inscribes, a biased and unjust order masquerading as truth (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 1998, pp.33-47). The task of the Postcolonial thinker, therefore, is to resist or undo these forms of domination and

32 Other historic geographic examples of terra nullius occupation abound, including the Western United States and Canada, parts of the Sahara, Niger, New Zealand, and elsewhere.
overriding ideologies while also working to recover that which has systematically been excluded or forgotten, i.e. the non-identical.

Mapping the human genome can be viewed as a symbolic narrative that displays a dialectic dissymmetry between the progressive aims of science and the commodifying pressures of the “medical industrial complex,” or health care industry. The rhetoric evoked in reference to the HGP on a governmental website bears a striking similarity to the colonizing process described above:

The Human Genome Project (HGP) was one of the great feats of exploration in history -- an inward voyage of discovery rather than an outward exploration of the planet or the cosmos; an international research effort to sequence and map all of the genes - together known as the genome -- of members of our species, *Homo sapiens*. Completed in April 2003, the HGP gave us the ability, for the first time, to read nature's complete genetic blueprint for building a human being (}
have very real effects, on both political bodies and individual bodies. Such is the case with the concentration camp which, as previously discussed, represents another effort to expunge alterity by attempting to place its characteristics outside of the mapped boundaries of the city.

Furthermore, according to Lisa Yun Lee, it is the same for Adorno:

...[a] logic of identity that is at work in the concentration camps and the systematic efforts to obliterate any contradiction, antagonism and forms of “Otherness”… the Holocaust is therefore not just another example of the destructive effects of identity thought, but the consummate proof that identity is death (Lee, 2005, p.141).

On this view, even death is dialectical. A corporeal nexus situated between a materialist inevitability and a desire for immortality, “as the subject lives less,” by having less freedom in administered society, the fear of death grows, and “out of the impulse towards self-preservation, life strives to become object-like in an attempt to ward off death” (Lee, 2005, p.141). Whether it is of physical land or genetic space, mapping is thus no small thing. For both Adorno and Agamben, be it a city or a body, the stakes of who gets to set the boundaries, exert power or suspend freedom, or choose to include or abandon in the circle of ethical concern, cannot be underestimated.

What I find particularly interesting about the Human Genome Project is not just how readily it facilitates contemplation as a symbolic narrative in which embodiment becomes a new frontier to conquer. Rather, despite all of the similarities with traditional colonial narratives which seem explicitly coercive or at least more overtly dominating, there is also a seductive mechanism in operation. When it pertains to their own bodies, individuals may be so seduced by the promise that this research allegedly holds that they not only submit to the potential
commodification of their bodies in ways that have proven to be potentially dangerous in the past, they perhaps welcome or even demand it.

b. Commodification, the HGP, and the Seductive Promise of Freedom

Mapping the human genome became an international, non-profit research project in which the United States alone contributed $3.8 billion in public funding. Throughout its run, updated findings were continuously posted on the Internet, actively promoting an ethos of sharing and freely accessible information. Instead of hindering development by eliminating profit-oriented competition, being non-proprietary was viewed as a progressive means to advance science by benefiting from collaboration as opposed to isolated, possibly repetitive, trial-and-error practices, thus also speeding research along in the process. The impressive results included locating approximately 1800 previously unidentified disease-related genes, and cutting the time to locate suspected inheritable conditions from years to mere days (NIH Factsheet, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). However, according to what has been described as the U.S. federal government’s “long-standing dedication to the transfer of technology to the private sector,” links to commercial ventures would soon follow, to the extent that:

By licensing technologies to private companies and awarding grants for innovative research, the project catalyzed the multibillion-dollar U.S. biotechnology industry and fostered the development of new medical applications (Post-HGP Progress report, U.S. Department of Energy Office of Science, 2012).

Although the claim is that they are privatizing the technologies, and not commodifying human biological material and biodata for profit and private use, the catalyzation of a so-called
“biotechnology” industry raises questions about the accuracy of this division. Indeed, one of the most controversial outcomes of the post-HGP research arena has been the emergence of over three million genome related patents, the material of which include genes, gene fragments, sequences, tests, proteins, and stem cells, thus allowing for “one organism to own all or part of another organism” (Genetics and Patenting, U.S. Department of Energy Office of Science, 2010). Although patents are alleged to foster more disclosure than competitive, private sector entities would likely make available without such protections, the process now discourages the free and open sharing that the public sector once considered so advantageous to advancing science and medicine.

For the most part, the potential benefits of commodification seem to have been accepted as making the trade-offs worthwhile. Although ethicists have raised concerns about potentially negative implications, the public’s demand is still is great. For example, apprehension that the relatively high cost of genetic testing will unfairly disenfranchise those who cannot afford access to it is met with the rebuttal that the more widely it becomes available, the greater the likelihood that continued refinement and competition will drive prices down. The primary challenge is to meet the demand and serve as many people who request it as possible. All in all, the HGP presents itself through a highly progressive narrative with seemingly few, if any, significant downsides. Then again, since it has been argued that commodification as a seductive practice is worthy of serious ethical consideration, and that this implies that any ethical theory that fails to take this into account is lacking a critical element, bioethicists would be remiss not to look more closely at the methodological structures at work.
Ostensibly, even as a form of commodification, no one is currently forcing this technology onto anyone, as they would be in clear cases of coercion. On the other hand, following Adorno, as individuals in highly commodified and administered societies find themselves with severely limited amounts of freedom, such that their very lives can be controlled or taken from them, the self-preservation instinct will only become more intense (Lee, 2005, p.141). Fearing death, individual life embraces its own objectification seemingly in an attempt to become that which cannot be killed. Or at least that is the seductive promise of objectification in this context. One submits, but not on equal, fully informed terms.

The pharmaceutical industry needs only hold out the promise of a solution to this life and death dialectic in order to pull individuals toward it. Individuals demand this research, willingly ignoring most of the concerns about patents and privatization or objectification and commodification more generally. One likely knows on some level that the industry cannot completely make good on its promise to alleviate this fear; after all, the instrumental endpoint would be a “cure” for death. Nonetheless, the idea of staving off death longer than ever thought possible means that the seductive allure of unparalleled genetic testing, treatment, and cures is often too great to be too closely scrutinized. The mechanisms may be seductive, but it still exhibits coercive tendencies.

The colonizing narrative continues to re-emerge in the case of druggable space. As a technical term, “druggability” is meant to denote no more than an ability to be modulated by tiny but forceful molecular drugs, and the “druggable genome” thus refers to the identifiable universe for pharmaceutical intervention (Hopkins and Groom, 2002, pp.727-729). Yet this exploratory search into the microcosms of genetic material appears to postulate a kind of “no one’s land,” a
genetic landscape that is treated as unowned and unoccupied. Insofar as the assumed rule of *terra nullius* is a claiming right, the technology of detecting druggability is similarly oriented to stake a claim to what it finds useful to its purposes, declaring the rest “empty” in the systematic neglect or repression of everything else. In inviting these ownership claims, perhaps even demanding them, individuals submit to having their values mapped or inscribed onto themselves, succumbing to colonization in the form of patents, sellable biometric information databases, and other instruments of commodification and control.

This is not to deny the genuine benefits and positive potential that this kind of research can produce. However, even in the purest sense of druggability research, there are no guarantees that the medical research companies need to ever make good on their tacit promises. That is, just as with developing new prescription drugs, claims of future cures might not be for existing illnesses but instead could lead to the genetic manipulation of recently problematized new conditions, thinly hypothesized correlations that lack proof of causation, or even just plain neglect of the unprofitable. Furthermore, research companies could potentially establish mini-monopolies, gathering biological information and materials and then selling the genes back to their owners. Thus, the progressive narrative should not be rejected so much as tempered by caution and a greater awareness. For all of the potential gains, the potential negative consequences should not be accepted unconditionally without further consideration.

By uncritically allowing private industry into the innermost regions of individuals’ DNA, this analogy can be extrapolated to speak to the colonization of human bodies as a kind of “druggable space” writ large. Evoking connotations of commodification, consumers-as-patients can be viewed as target markets, and the task for pharmaceutical companies is to identify the
most tractable, or those most susceptible to their ideology, and focus their efforts on them. In the case of Viagra, for example, the pharmaceutical company’s mission was not to eradicate erectile dysfunction permanently once and for all. Rather, it came to be one of finding or convincing ever more people to be treated, and thus sold, patented prescriptions on a regular basis. This is a pattern that is repeated frequently with lifestyle drugs, often starting with the problematization of alleged symptoms, medicalizing the condition or syndrome, and meeting the manufactured demand for treatment with ongoing access to a temporary solution in the form of a product. In this manner, under the seductive guise of freedom, individuals can conversely become more beholden to the seducer, effectively finding themselves in a zone of indistinction.

(viii) Seduction: Beyond the Narrative

Examining narratives such as the pharmaceutical industry and the Human Genome Project illustrate why it is apt for bioethicists to take notice of the paradigm shift from coercion to seduction in widespread commodification practices. Unlike coercion, which is typified by the threat of, “Do this or else,” seduction works through the allure of suggesting, “I have whatever you want or need, and all you have to do is come to me.” As I have stated previously, this makes the attribution of responsibility more ambiguous. Admittedly, there is always an example, such as that of the lingering case of the slightly disingenuous but nonetheless consensual sexual encounter, or some similar scenario, that amounts to seduction but for which the seducee is not only happy to participate, but forever grateful to have been seduced. As such, there is no need for an outright ethical condemnation of seduction.

Be that as it may, I contend that these one-to-one, zero sum exchanges are comparatively rare in the grand scheme of possibilities. The willing and blissful sexual encounter described
above might take on additional ethical dimensions if, say, the seducer purposely failed to mention a partner and three children at home, and if the seducee had some inkling to that affect but decided to go ahead anyway, knowing that bystanders’ lives would likely be affected. That is to say, it is rare that acts of seduction can be completely decontextualized from other people and, furthermore, instances of seduction involving commodification tend operate in somewhat different ways.

Furthermore, when an individual, out of fear of death, disease, social unacceptance, or just the unknown, demands ever greater commodification of one’s own body, it is usually in an interrelated context. As with the direct to consumer marketing of pharmaceuticals, people may have their suspicions that they are being manipulated somewhat, but they still demand the right to retain what they believe is autonomous choice in the name of personal freedom. In addition, when perceived health and wellbeing are on the line, the distinct mechanism of seduction can still operate in the framework of fear and can also exhibit coercive properties.

In capitulating to seductive practices, moreover, individuals could potentially be putting not only themselves, but also others, in greater jeopardy of unjust domination, exploitation, or even physical danger. On the theoretical level, the colonization of druggable space employs a kind of identity thinking that treats everyone as interchangeable, and thus always does an injustice to someone or something, leaving behind some residue of that which is inevitably overlooked. In practice, as with the potentially fatal side-effect, many individuals assume that a certain number of people will die or become seriously ill from a treatment, and then gamble that it won’t be them. This could just be an unavoidable fact that weighs out as ethically neutral. Yet in light of the examples discussed here and throughout this essay with regard to the influx of
commodifying mechanisms, it is safe to say that this will not always be the case. Thus, it is the

task of the ethicist to recognize oppressive structures of commodification, be they seductive or

coercive, and work to undo them, avoid them, or actively recover what is systematically, and

perhaps unjustly, forgotten.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

(i) A Better Understanding of the Machinations of Commodification

The main problem that I addressed in this dissertation is how commodification as a seductive practice differs from commodification as a coercive practice, and why this distinction is ethically significant. My initial interest in this problem developed as I began to explore the perceived links between commodification and coercion. A number of thinkers had raised ethical objections to commodification, particularly when commodification was applied to human bodies and labor. They typically rebuked these practices for increasingly encroaching into human life and as being coercive in nature. Significantly less philosophical attention had been paid to seduction, and not much at all had been written about it in relation to commodification. It seemed to me, however, that instances of commodification as a seductive practice were just as or even more pervasive in today’s social, institutional, and economic contexts and seemed to more accurately typify what was commonly occurring in commodification. In addition, in the rare instances when seduction was addressed, ethicists tended to approach it using more or less the same criteria as they did for determining cases of coercion. This struck me as problematic on two key counts. First, simply including seduction under the umbrella of coercion, as though all seduction could simply be reduced to another form of coercion, fails to take into account the unique way in which seduction employs enticement rather than force or threat to achieve a desired end. This inaccuracy in regard to how commodification operates can lead to misunderstandings and missed chances to identify ways in which human life can be drawn into and subsequently caught within mechanisms beyond one’s control. On the other hand, overemphasizing the differences between seduction and coercion without properly
acknowledging their similarities increases the likelihood that seductive practices will be too hastily deemed harmless and ethically irrelevant.

Consequently, I have sought to bridge this problematic gap by putting forth the thesis that, in regard to commodification, the structural discrepancies between seduction and coercion are such that in practice they yield different degrees of ethical ambiguity and without proper consideration this significant difference can remain undetected or ignored, thus establishing or perpetuating systems of unjust domination and oppression. That is, I am asserting that there are modes of commodification which could be better typified as seductive rather than coercive in practice, and in recognizing this distinction ethicists can attain a deeper awareness of how the characterization of commodification might come to impact their understanding of oppressive conceptual frameworks and, moreover, how they can be addressed and resisted.

The main argument in support of this thesis states that:

1) If a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction has occurred in widespread commodification practices, then seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion.

2) If seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion, then any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element.

3) Therefore, if a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction has occurred in widespread commodification practices, then any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element.
I utilized this argument to show that ethicists who might otherwise be adept at recognizing coercive structures run the risk of overlooking the mechanizations of seduction that can initially seem to provide greater freedom, but ultimately inhibit freedom in many of the same ethically problematic ways as are commonly found in cases of coercion.

Now I would like to explain how each of the chapters in this dissertation worked to advance and support this argument.

(ii) A Summary of the Chapters

The partial purpose of Chapter One was to foreground the argument as a whole by elucidating what is meant by the key terms involved: seduction, coercion, and commodification. In addition, in order to conclude that any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element, it was important to make clear at the outset what is meant by “critical” in this context. Thus, it also clarified the use of the word “critical” and placed it in relation to Theodor Adorno’s framework for critique as a philosophical method of ethical inquiry and judgment.

Adorno’s critical theory is rooted in the assertion that society is dialectically constructed, and that individuals caught within these competing forces are highly subject to the pervasive ideologies that surround them. Because of this, he claims that empirical investigations into society are obscured by underlying biases that tend to result in self-referential reflections that primarily serve to reinforce existing norms. One way he works toward overcoming this problem is by putting forth an aesthetic theory with an ethical bite.

Adorno asserts that by examining art it becomes possible to recognize societal tensions that permit us to examine or reflect upon presuppositions in our thought. Of particular importance are those biases that are tied to unjust domination and oppression and suffering.
To illustrate Adorno’s approach, I considered a Joseph Cornell’s *Untitled (Butterfly Habitat)* assemblage as an example of a work that seems to match his criteria of autonomous art, or art which is capable of raising questions by bringing these tensions and contradictions to our attention. Although there isn’t a completely definitive litmus test to determine what qualifies as “autonomous” art in Adorno’s sense of the term, the formal elements of this piece appear to point to a number of tensions held in suspension, such as: freedom versus containment, natural versus manufactured, subject versus object. *Untitled (Butterfly Habitat)* is a strong piece that has earned lasting international attention for its ability to sustain a seductive allure despite being presented in a simple, static, and symmetrical manner. The work presents a juxtaposition of life and freedom against that of capture, coercion, and consumerism that calls for further reflection.

Interdisciplinary by design, Adorno’s methodology can be understood as a critical tool for uncovering ideologies and internal contradictions that might not be obvious on the surface. This robust sense of critique and critical reflection are employed to illuminate the ways in which conceptual frameworks may appear to champion a progressive freedom yet at the same time paradoxically limit the choices and self-determination of the individuals they allege to emancipate. For Adorno, an ethical dimension is implicit in this process, as it addresses the reality of human suffering at the hands of unjust domination even amidst the promise that the technological breakthroughs that commodification practices seemingly hold for increasing individual freedom and ridding the world of various societal ills. Thus, establishing early on how Adorno’s substantial attention to commodification in conjunction with his robust sense of the term “critical” is pivotal to laying the groundwork for understanding the ethical implications of a shift from coercive to seductive practices in commodification.
Chapter Two builds off of the first chapter by taking a closer look at the pervasiveness of commodification in everyday life and defending the premise that if a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction has occurred in widespread commodification practices, then seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion. I began by applying a critical approach to Roy Lichtenstein’s *Drowning Girl* painting. The rationale for subjecting Pop art of this kind to an Adornoistic critique is that it presents a compelling example of the growing influence of commodification and the Culture Industry that Adorno despised in a manner that nonetheless still calls forth tensions for further reflection. In particular, the work demonstrates an artistic shift from the expression of underlying coercive forces to one that is reflective of a contemporary era largely dominated by seduction. As I discussed in this chapter, Adorno makes a good case for why commodification can have negative ramifications for human freedom, but his attention to seduction is scant and underdeveloped in comparison to his concerns regarding coercion. I contended that if seduction has come to rival coercion as a means of influence and control in society, then the ethical stakes should be the same. Moreover, if seductive practices have in fact become widespread, then ethicists who fail to pay them serious consideration are likely to overlook patterns of unjust domination, oppression, and suffering.

Lichtenstein’s work, and the subsequent application of Adorno’s theory to it, also functions as a bridge to my discussion of the work of Gilles Lipovetsky. My treatment of Lichtenstein illustrates the tension between the desire for authenticity and the high art aesthetic of the museum versus the accessibility and reproducibility of the comic book, with the figurative elements suspended in the middle. For Lipovetsky, this is indicative of the intersection of commodification and the body that defines our current age. Lipovetsky’s extensive account of the history of fashion provides a good deal of support for my contention that a paradigm shift has
occurred and that these practices are currently operating in ways that are more accurately defined as seductive rather than coercive. He makes a compelling case that the influence of commodification via seduction has reached new levels such that seductive practices have replaced coercive forces as the dominant means of influence in society.

However, Lipovetsky seems to reach the conclusion that the conceptual ties between seduction and consumer cultures ultimately result in increased tolerance of others and the near extinction of totalitarian structures. Seemingly, this would virtually eliminate the need to question seductive practices from an ethical perspective as they would be largely irrelevant. However, I believe that this is an incorrect and risky path to follow. Consequently, having established that a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction has occurred in widespread commodification practices, as well as having argued that seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion, I launched a preliminary response to these objections. That is, I contended that the risks of focusing on perceived exceptions to an allegedly imperfect but otherwise surprisingly rational and beneficial system rather than focusing on the overall systemic structure of seduction itself remain formidable. This is especially dangerous for lives caught in the balance or relegated to the margins.

My response to Lipovetsky’s potential objections is continued further in the following chapter. Specifically, Chapter Three builds off of Chapter Two by providing a more detailed response to Lipovetsky’s conclusions while defending the next premise that if seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion, then any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element. This response is foregrounded by the Chrysler advertisement “Born of Fire” and a genealogical history demonstrating the pervasiveness of commodification in the cinematic history of Detroit. These were employed as a
means to providing a closer look at contemporary art, the moving image, and commodity in order to more firmly establish the prevalence of seductive practices and why they sometimes elude ethical attention but nonetheless remain extremely relevant. Perhaps as Adorno feared, it has now become difficult to discern art from advertisement at times, but I maintained that this does not mean we cannot still glean important insights from considering it.

In this case, I reject Lipovetsky’s conclusion, and assert that his theory demonstrates that it is lacking a critical element by drawing upon the mythologizing symbolism surrounding Detroit and the lives of its residents. Totalitarianism, I contended, has not disappeared. Rather, it often assumes protean forms, morphing from a defined reliance upon direct threat of harm into a more manipulative, soft totalitarianism. This manipulation is typically deceptive, frequently promising increased freedom while all too often restricting it. Moreover, it appears to be a hallmark of seductive commodification practices.

In addition, I further defended this premise by appealing to Giorgio Agamben’s work. Agamben not only provides additional support for the assertion that totalitarianism is still a great concern today, and thus still in need of ethical consideration, he does so in a manner that touches on Lipovetsky’s assertion that when ethics fail and injustice or intolerance do occur that these are anomalies. That is, Lipovetsky views injustice and intolerance as exceptions rather than the rule. On his view, these exceptions supposedly interrupt society’s otherwise fanciful preoccupations with the fashionable, disposable, and mundane consumer culture. Yet what Lipovetsky fails to recognize but what Agamben shows is that these alleged “exceptions” quite often become the rule. For Agamben, this is particularly evident when examining the frequency with which human life is caught within structural machinations such that the defining paradox of our time is
the way in which the suspension of human rights has become accepted as justifiable and necessary for ensuring freedom.

As with Adorno, Agamben’s work is still coming mainly from a perspective that focuses on coercion more explicitly than seduction. However, I asserted that the manipulative techniques which lead to a willingness to accept – or even demand— that these “zones of exception” be put into place are very much in line with my argument that seduction is just as frequently at work here. Hence, ethicists must take this into account.

To summarize thus far, then: The first chapter established the problem, its significance, the weaknesses of past attempts to address the problem, and proposed a critical methodology to begin to address it from an ethical perspective. The second chapter defended the premise that if a paradigm shift from coercion to seduction has occurred in widespread commodification practices, then seduction is just as worthy of serious ethical consideration as coercion. I used Lipovetsky as additional support for my argument that this paradigm shift has indeed occurred, yet I also acknowledged the potential objection that Lipovetsky’s conclusion holds for my view: namely that just because this paradigm shift has occurred, it doesn’t automatically entail that this is of any great ethical import. I then moved to overcome these objections and in Chapter Three I established why, because this shift has occurred, that any ethical theory that fails to take seduction into account is lacking a critical element.

In Chapter Four I apply the work done thus far to contemporary bioethics. My purpose here was to show the relevance of this approach and how it is able to overcome both a) the limitations of Lipovetsky’s attempts to address seduction in commodification, which do not adequately account for totalitarianism, and b) Adorno and Agamben’s efforts to address commodification in coercion and totalitarianism, which do not adequately account for seductive
practices. In order to illustrate how ethicists might close this gap, I examined the trajectory of bioethics in conjunction with the development of the pharmaceutical industry, an interrelated series of events that have largely been viewed as a progressive narrative. Taking into consideration how this narrative plays out in relation to the human body demonstrates why such reflective endeavors remain important for attending to seduction in widespread commodification practices. This can be seen via an examination of a paradigm shift in the manufacturing and marketing of pharmaceutical drugs which, I contended, very closely resembles the paradigm shift between commodification as a coercive practice and commodification as a seductive practice. Throughout this chapter, attention was paid to the human body as an intersection of commodification and freedom. It was argued that seduction is ethically problematic when its promise of freedom is, in actuality, largely employed as another means of limitation and control that hinders one’s self or restricts the freedom others.

In looking toward the future, then, a narrative of the Human Genome Project and the notion of druggable space were examined through a Postcolonial lens in order to illustrate how commodification is being inscribed into ever more intimate parts of the body. It is unclear how this will ultimately unfold, and this is an area for further application of this research.

(iii) Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this dissertation has been to provide a better understanding of commodification practices and to challenge the progressive narratives that are often attached to them in contemporary society. I have maintained that although ethicists have long been focused on recognizing various forms of coercive mechanisms at work in commodification and elsewhere, far less attention has been paid to commodification as a seductive practice. I have
argued that because a paradigm shift has occurred in widespread commodification practices that can now be more readily typified as seductive rather than coercive, seductive practices are just as worthy of ethical consideration as coercive practices and, therefore, any ethical theory that fails to adequately take seduction into account is lacking a critical element.

Most notably for ethicists, unjust domination materializes in forms of social control in which people are seduced into dangerous ideologies, many of which allege to hold out the promise of increased freedom or safety while in fact foreclosing those possibilities. That is to say, one buys into the allure of freedom, but pays for this enticement with freedom itself. These systemic mechanisms not only fail to live up to expectations, they can actually result in a reversal of the instrumental reasoning that once made them seem justified. This can result in very real consequences, at times holding life in a precarious balance. Therefore, seductive practices should not be ignored. However, unlike in clear cut cases of coercion, the challenge of addressing seduction is that it initially results in markedly greater ethical ambiguity. For even if the seducer is not being entirely forthright and truthful, because of how seduction operates, there is usually some awareness of this on the side of the seducee. By willingly choosing to subscribe to the seductive ideology anyway, the seducee exhibits more volition than in instances of coercion where it could be said that one had little or no choice but to comply. Thus, the seducee appears to be somewhat complicit in what transpires.

Nonetheless, it is not as though these mitigating factors should necessarily exonerate the seducer, lest unjust manipulation go unpunished or blame be unfairly reverted to the victim after only so much as a hint of willing acquiescence. This would be a grave misuse of this argument, and akin to suggesting that a perpetrator could not be held accountable for fraud because the
victim has a sense that the deal might be too good to be true, but chose to take it anyway. Rather, the purpose here is to recognize new forms of unjust domination and work to avoid, resist, eliminate, or at the very least minimize, their force and impact.

Consequently, because of the paradigm shift that has occurred, in which widespread commodification practices that would have previously been characterized as primarily coercive can now just as frequently be typified as seductive, ethicists would do well to rethink what freedom really means and to employ critical methodologies that work towards attaining a better understanding of commodification as a seductive practice. As such, instead of closing the door on freedom, new possibilities can emerge for more nuanced methodologies, more sophisticated ethical theories, and stronger, more meaningful applications of those theories in practice.


Andrae, Thomas. “Adorno on Film and Mass Culture: The Culture Industry Reconsidered.”


Runtime: 87 minutes.


Jewkes, Stephen and Rebaudo, Stefano. “Fiat Sees at Least 100,000 Jeeps Made in China in


Mayor, Susan. “Pfizer Will Not Apply for a License for Sildenafil for Women,” *British Medical*


Thielen, Jacqueline M.. “Viagra for Women: Why Doesn’t it Exist?” The Mayo Clinic online,


