

# **Celebrities: Media Culture and the Phenomenology of Gadget Commodity Life.**

## **Anthony Curtis Adler.**

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In this book, Anthony Adler (a full professor of philosophy at Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea) has brought together some of the philosophical aspects drawn from Heidegger, Marx, Althusser, and other influential thinkers in terms of their contributions to categories such as production and reproduction, commodities and consumption, being(s), values, and politics. Adler is well-acquainted with Martin Heidegger's studies and refers to those most often; in fact, Heidegger's influence on the scholar can be read throughout the entire book. That being said, the primary strength of this book is the ideological diversity of the represented philosophers whose papers were widely cited, compared with each other, and analysed from different dimensions.

The book is divided into two parts with fourteen separate chapters. Part 1 represents a phenomenological entity of different but well-connected definitions (the Gadget, the Celebrity, the Commodity). Part 2 practically analyses the number of TV shows, series, movies, musicals, and cartoons from the angle of their phenomenological interpretation. The first part contains eleven relatively short chapters that are linked to each other. This logical arrangement of allows readers to follow the chapters with ease. The three final chapters included in the book's second part are constructed in a slightly different way: a charmingly abrupt and jerky narration that appears vital, alive and intriguing. On the one hand, the second part is highly accessible to those who are not experts on Heidegger's phenomenology or even familiar with most of his corpus. On the other hand, from the general public's perspective, the first part might appear difficult to grasp by non-philosophers. However, I doubt that

philosophers will agree with me in this statement: the delicacy of the first part turns out to be its strength and the book definitely has its own unique audience.

The book starts with an autobiographical memory about television that Adler shares with his readers. This helps us feel the author's fondness for and engagement with the content. Chapter 1, "The Phenomenology of Television", introduces the historical background of Heidegger. Heidegger's time was the time when the concept of existence — *Dasein* ("existence" in German) — could appear in its new interpretation. An upgraded meaning of *Dasein* became visible at that particular time when reasons for it were undoubtedly identified: namely, the appearance of wired technologies. The telegraph, then the radio and television not only had utilitarian purposes but also changed the phenomenology of time and space interactions in everyday life. Radio listeners and especially TV watchers were able to be allegorically present or exist in different places at the same time: here and there. Heidegger was able to comprehensively reflect on the dramatic changes that technology had on social history, turning human beings in dubious ways into the creation of a new reality. Heidegger's fundamental work *Being and Time* reflected this vision of *Dasein*.

Chapter 2, titled "The Life Not Ours to Live," starts with an example of the extraordinary foolishness of the cartoon characters *Beavis and Butt-head*. Adler points out that those characters personify two forms of life: real and TV. These lives collide with each other; sometimes they are mixed together without the chance to distinguish or identify them. It is a projection of people who are required to choose and to live "only one life (...) which may be lived differently"

(p. 22), and the choice is more likely to be suggested by TV itself. Consequently, Adler suggests, the identity of a personage, real or fictional, might be lost or stolen. Changing the channels is a solution to obtaining a new identity, which will probably repeat the controversies and the problems of the previous one: ‘the life that we do not live’ (p. 27) but may choose. The solution to how to return or to restore somebody’s identity would be to destroy TV itself, but this option seems too radical. Choosing and changing life, both real and on TV, is an endlessly rotating *Carousel*.

Real life also gives us another decision — *gadgets*. Gadgets allow people to project their everydayness through nostalgic desires and dreams of past simplicity. This recycling, with the assistance of gadgets, has been relocated to the new field of the Internet. The Internet is not a panacea. While restoring our identity with digital images, it stores them chaotically, in clouds. This turns out to have a similar effect to the *Carousel*: the Internet replaces television life “with the absolute simultaneity of possibilities’ (p. 38). The *gadget-commodity life*, the key term the author proposes, is the new appearance of reality with the next round of changes and choices.

Chapter 3, “The Celebrity and the Nobody”, introduces a new player from the gadget-commodity life, which is the *Celebrity*. The category of the *Celebrity* opposes to the *Nobody*, while televisual *Dasein* provides the existence of both sides. The *Celebrity* — “they” — have been distinguished from the rest, while the *Nobody*, constantly passing by everyone else. The *Celebrity* and the *Nobody* both exist and live within *Das Man*. Addressing the question of why the *Celebrity* is so much more important than the *Nobody*, Adler suggests that *celebrities* are seen as children, who behave like children and the nostalgic memories of *nobodies* are rekindled by watching celebrities, the *Carousel* of *nostalgia*. Paparazzi, hunting the *Celebrities*, provide the link between them and the *Nobodies*. Echoing in the bundle of the television-*Celebrity*-paparazzi, those who exist for the sake of each other’s existence, *nobodies* become *somebodies*, *The One*. In his book *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* (2016), Tim Wu uses almost the same words in describing the phenomenon of celebrities — “the Other, beyond us, yet at the same time like us.” Even though the concept of celebrities is not new (Wu refers to the Greek gods, the transcendence of the normal), yet since the 1970s, it has become manufactured to capture our attention, and has been commercialized.

Chapter 4, “Being(s)”, refers to Heidegger’s philosophical approaches toward “the history of being” (p. 52), that is the history of the matter of being. Otherwise, history without the matter of being does not make any sense. It is about making decisions

that distinguish human being(s) from plants and animals. The ontological question of decisions against decisions and decisions for decisions remains logically appropriate and indicates the rotation of the cycle. Penetrating the vicious cycle remains controversial and too vague for *being(s)*. The author notices that the difference between *being* and *beings* lays in the multitude of ontologies. *The commodity*, another key element of *the gadget-commodity life* now arrives on the scene. Adler refers to Lukacs’s *History and Class Consciousness* where we are given a detailed analysis of commodities fetishism, noticing that the commodity as a part of capitalist mode, needs to be produced and reproduced. Television produces the commodity and gives it its own life, allowing the commodity to penetrate society.

The transition from the commodity to “The Life of Things,” Chapter 5, smoothly connects Heidegger’s phenomenology — the history of being, with Marx’s historical materialism. This allows us to look at the commodity from different angles, such as the metaphysical one. The commodity produces metaphysics, while the essence of it is *ideology*. “Ideology and Truth,” Chapter 6, makes references to Heidegger’s educational course “On the Essence of Truth”, which means to teach about the nature of ideology. Adler recalls Heidegger’s perceptions of ideology and being in contrast Plato’s, Marx’s, Hegel’s, and Nietzsche’s philosophical implications about ideology.

Through Heidegger’s allegory of the cave, what is human history, Adler interprets that as history with many possibilities for a man in the relation in his historical age. Thus, *Dasein* is “the truth of being, the ecstatic openness to being” (p. 67), and it opens a question about ideology and its relation to *the truth*, or the truth of *the National Socialism*. The essence of the truth finds its continuous clarification in Chapter 7, “The Truth of the Commodity.” *The commodity*, which most likely relates to Marx’s materialism, was not mentioned in Heidegger’s lectures, and Adler admits that Heidegger’s suggestions regarding the commodity were not developed further than Marx’s. Adler concluded that the truth about the commodity is the production of the commodity *as* the commodity.

In Chapter 8, “Value, Publicity, Politics,” the author seeks to learn what the commodity is, beyond its metaphysical interpretation. Marx’s justification of the commodity is interpreted through Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* — both concepts appear in their renewed forms, making them both too distant and too close to one another. *Dasein*, the existence, reflects in (human) being(s). The relationships between human beings are the relationship between *the things*. The things mirror back the commodity. Hence, human beings, through their relationships with each other, are reflected in the

commodity. Adler warns that Heidegger's academic philosophy, seen from this angle, might lead to nationalism and radical asymmetry.

The interpretation of the commodity does not intend to force a choice between Marx or Heidegger, as Adler notices, but brings up to the point of *undecidability*, which is the main idea of Chapter 9, "Reproduction". Following this path, Adler again puts his attention to an essay on ideology, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" by Louis Althusser, "to rethink ideology beyond the limits of the 'ideological conception of ideology'" (p. 101). Althusser's analysis of ideology as the question of the reproduction of the conditions of production, leads to an understanding of the force of the underground conjuncture of Marx and Heidegger. The author analyses Althusser's idealism through Marxism and Heideggerianism. Adler comes to the conclusion that the categories of *production* and *reproduction* are not only seen from their materialistic perspective but also from an ideological one.

The author rhetorically asks if there is a deeper, more primordial level of ideology where the reproduction of the conditions of production might possibly be discovered, and suggests that modern technology be considered as "a change in the mode of its alethic productivity" (p. 122). In Chapter 10, "The Gadget", Adler binds together the previously analyzed categories and the notions of *the commodity*, *being(s)*, *celebrity*, and *production*, drawing the profound analysis of those in their interaction and accumulation. The consequent shift is turned from production to consumption that happened in the time of post-ideological capitalism, where the conditions of production are rather more phenomenological than ideological. The shift is characterized by the emergence of television, which was a sight of something new: *the gadget*. The gadget, which was not particularly defined, is the commodity itself, that provides the way to (hyper)consumerism and changes *Dasein* to a *commodity-life*.

The turn to *the gadget-commodity life* is the quintessence of the book, its culmination. At this point, Adler qualifies the gadget-commodity life, enriches it with new labels such as *singularity*, *new being(s)*, and *new horizons*. Chapter 11, "To the Things Themselves", concludes the first part of the book. Here the author puts together the chunks of television, the celebrity, and the gadget-commodity and draws the contours of other possibilities of their interaction.

Adler states that "there can be no practice of production without a theory, no theory without a practice" (p. 125) and follows this statement throughout the book. If Part I might be considered as theory, grounded on a philosophical and phenomenological base, Part II is certainly praxis, or the crossroads from philosophy to media and communication studies. This is everydayness in the modern sciences, when

the sciences become more inter/multi-disciplinary, combining each other's achievements to arrive at unpredicted results. Television is a source of communication, which demands the audience's reflection and its determination.

Communication through self-identity reminds me of the article by Bent Fausing (2015) who observes the self-media. Fausing recapitulates the stages of the self-media, where the time of television begins in 1929, just two years before Heidegger's *Being and Time*. At this time, self-reflection and self-construction using media became dominant in society. The TV reality was replaced by the digital revolution of late modernity, approximately in 2006. Since then, the gadget-commodity life stepped on to the next stage with different guides and markers: YouTube, social media, selfies, etc. To comprehend the roots of the late-modern and its shift toward self-positioning, Adler's guidance throughout *Celebrities* is helpful and, as it can be seen now, was precisely predicted to some degree.

Chapter 12, "Methods", briefly introduces the methods that were used throughout the analysis of a number of television series, movies, and song/music videos. The methods, from a critic's perspective, as Adler projects himself, are represented allegorically as "Satanic Laughter," "Vita Contemplativa," or "The Raccoon Trap." The long read of Chapters 13, "Celebrity", and 14, "Television/Gadget", recall categories that were previously dissected and observed theoretically.

Considering all of the TV shows that are contained in the book, I believe any reader can find something that is familiar, touching or even disgraceful. Readers might recognize themselves in the patterns of how people react to and consume TV, how TV affects people, and what TV shows tend to deliver. Consequently, not all of the time spent unveiling the truth about ourselves through the gadget-commodity life is a relief, but rather a stress.

The second part of the book seems highly autobiographical, where the author openly reveals personal experiences, feelings, and emotions toward television. Whether Adler watches TV carefully and absently, being fully awake or falling asleep, having lucid dreams or thinking consciously, it is still about consuming TV. This is the case where and when reality mingles with mythology, when alive and died celebrities coexist and might be looked at through the lens of philosophy, where philosophical and theological classifications are applied to celebrities. All this together infinitely exists and can be applied to understanding the gadget-commodity life.

Concluding the review on a personal note, I have to admit that the book is a kind of saviour for me. I am, unlike the author, rather a sceptic more than

a critic or a dogmatist, a person who constantly absorbs information converting it into endless and, perhaps, infantile sounding questions: Do we project ourselves as someone we see on TV, on the Internet, or through social media? Do we compare celebrities to ourselves, or do we simply copy celebrities? Can we choose who we want to look like or who we want to be? Are celebrities unreachable as if existing on the mythological Mt. Olympus or are they the people next door? We may follow celebrities in real time on social media as stalkers. We even track them using the geo-locations they give us, but we still feel far away from them. At the same time, we, the real people, have already mis-mashed with celebrities as mythological characters: gods, nymphs, satyrs, and all that looks

normal, not strange.

The book is profound, raising more unanswered questions than providing readers with clear answers. And this is the beauty of the book.

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