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The Junkification of the World

The State of (Everyday) Things

(Original German title: Die Verkrempelung der Welt Zum Stand der Dinge (des Alltags))

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Why don’t you buy something else if you don’t like it

No one:

Literally no one:

AEG engineers: 0 1 3 5 8 10 14 A

So it’s come to this. I’ve become my mother.

That was the thought that entered my mind when I looked at the hob of my new oven. Nothing made any sense. What do these numbers mean? Where am I supposed to press? Help!

This must be how my parents feel when some mysterious window pops up on their computer or their phone asking for a password to something they’ve never even heard of. One minute, you’re confidently operating some device, the next, it seems entirely foreign to you, almost hostile.

In February 2022, I posted a photo of the control panel of my stove on Twitter, and 7,000 likes later, I knew I was onto something. Instead of the classic knobs at the front of kitchen or other household appliances, the temperature on my new hob is controlled by a tiny touch panel that only responds on the third attempt, is located right next to the scolding pots, and switches off with a beep when it comes into contact with said pots (or water). And it displays the entirely enigmatic sequence of characters “0 1 3 5 8 10 14 A”.

Everything about this user interface is completely incomprehensible. But what defies comprehension most of all is how it ever got through the development process, user testing, quality control, and finally onto the shelves of German retailers. Who came up with this? Why didn’t anyone at any of the product meetings stand up and say: I’m sorry, but that is absolute nonsense!

This hob is not some outlier. Both cheaper and more expensive competitors alike are often equipped with touch controls that offer no relevant advantages but do offer an assortment of undeniable disadvantages. The knobs that used to be standard on such devices could be operated without looking, without bending or burning your fingers (because you didn’t have to poke your fingers right where the hot pots and pans were), and they responded immediately and reliably, even if your hands were wet. The touch panels have only one advantage, but not for consumers: they are indeed cheaper to manufacture – the thing is, though, the cookers are not sold any cheaper. And if you do want a new hob with the old controls, you have to pay extra.

Of course, not everything about new appliances is worse. Anyone who has ever cooked with induction will agree that this technology has many advantages over a conventional glass-ceramic cooktop – the temperature can be controlled more precisely and they use less energy. What’s more, the glass does not get hot (though the pot does!).

With appliances like these, we witness a peculiar simultaneity of progress and regression. While the primary functions – in the case of the stove, heating food – are performed more effectively and efficiently, the product requires us to operate it via a cumbersome,

unnecessarily complicated apparatus. It is not things that serve us, rather things seek to be served (or operated) by us, philosopher of media Vilém Flusser wrote in his 1993 book *Dinge und Undinge.*[1] And this need for objects to be addressed and touched has grown rapidly in a whole range of product categories.

And while washing machines and dishwashers achieve impressive results while using less electricity and water than ever before, they offer a growing range of (often supposedly AI-assisted) programmes that nobody ever uses. They beep elaborate melodies and flash to get the attention of the entire family, when all anyone really wants is clean laundry and crockery. In exchange, they break down more quickly than older models.

In terms of energy consumption and durability, modern LEDs are almost embarrassingly superior to classic lightbulbs, and even the issue of unpleasantly cool luminescence has since been largely resolved. However, fancy home automation systems require guests to install an app just to turn on the lights in the bathroom.

Cars are safer than ever before, and advances in battery production now also mean that there are electric cars with decent ranges. But in the 2019 model of Germany's best-selling car, the VW Golf, the heating and air conditioning are no longer controlled by buttons, but via a touch-sensitive, unlit control panel that can only be found at night if you know where it is, and which you cannot operate without taking your eyes off the road. And it's worth keeping in mind that these are not the controls for some obscure special functions, but for changing the temperature inside the vehicle.

The radio in the 2019 Golf also does away with, as *Autozeitung* reported, those: "beloved dials. In plain language: you have to find the touch surfaces for "Volume +" and "Volume –" and operate them by tapping or holding down your finger. That often doesn't work as desired

[1] Vilém Flusser, *Dinge und Undinge: Phänomenologische Skizzen*, Munich: Hanser 1997.

while driving, has to be repeated, and, even after getting used to it, cannot be done without looking. As a result, all our testers bemoaned the absence of the tried and tested dial."[2]

The reasons behind these remarkable design decisions are not just to be found in the lower cost of touch controls, they also might be related to excessive speculative innovations in other areas. In VW fan forums, some users have postulated that the climate-control unit conceals an infrared sensor for the new gesture-recognition system, which is why this surface has to remain unlit. The sensor allows users to adjust the radio volume by making swiping gestures in the air. In testing, these gesture controls have not performed particularly well. Especially since the gesturer has to memorise the different movements.

Paradigms of operating appliances change over time – that is not something to be criticised. Today, we play albums via Spotify, and only a small number of nostalgics mourn the passing of vinyl. But the way that Volkswagen (and many of its competitors) replace perfectly functional solutions with ergonomically inferior ones, while at the same time promoting progress in the form of touch and gesture control – that takes a certain skill for self-deception. And this also goes for the customers, who after all want to like their vehicles. (As a side note, five years after the launch of the Golf VIII, in its 2024 "facelift", the climate-control panel is once again illuminated – as it had been for decades prior. You can't make this stuff up.)

I've never heard anyone in my social circles saying that consumer goods are getting better and worse at the same time. Meanwhile, the assertion that that everything used to be better is modern folklore. "They don't make 'em like that anymore," as the saying goes. Like zombies, problems that had already been solved in widely available products haunt our everyday lives. Things that have worked perfectly get worse in the latest generation of a product for seemingly inexplicable reasons.

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[2] Holger Ippen, "Wisch und weg – Eine feine Geste", in: *Autozeitung* (24 May 2018); available online at: {https://www.autozeitung.de/gestensteuerung-test-192557.html#test:_gestensteuerung_im_nbsp_vw_golf_und_bmw_7er} (All URLS, as of December 2024).

This diagnosis of consumerism and its discontents is not just my own personal impression. All around the Western world, consumers are looking at their latest purchases in despair. A headline in the online magazine *Vox* reads, for example: "Your stuff is actually worse now".[3] The magazine *Wirtschaftswoche* complains: "The quality of many goods and services are deteriorating."[4] "Your sweaters are garbage," states *The Atlantic*.[5] But it's not just consumer goods that are affected. In a scientific article, doctors have complained about the increasingly thin plastic used in breathing apparatuses – a potentially life-threatening development. The worrying headline reads: "Quality fade in medical device manufacturing."[6] "Quality fade" is typically translated into German as "*Qualitätsabbau*", or quality "reduction" or "dismantling", but that would suggest a deliberate action, an agent that deliberately reduces something. "Fade", on the other hand, implies a process of decline, something for which no one is specifically responsible. In fact, both things are true.

And it doesn't just affect physical objects. Products that exist exclusively online also deteriorate. Author Cory Doctorow has described the evident deterioration of social media platforms by coining the term "enshittification". "Platform capitalism", argues Doctorow, leads to monopolies and thus inevitably to products that are just good enough to prevent a mass exodus of users.[7]

You could call these phenomena first-world problems. Nobody is forced to waste their time on social media. If you always buy the latest model, you're buying things are not quite

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[3] Izzie Ramirez, "Your stuff is actually worse now: How the cult of consumerism ushered in an era of badly made products", in: *Vox* (4. January 2023); available online at: {https://www.vox.com/the-goods/235295 87/consumer-goods-quality-fast-fashion-technology}.
[4] Gunther Schnabl/Tim Sepp, "Treiben schlechte Produkte die versteckte Inflation?", in: *Wirtschaftswoche* (20 October 2021); available online at: {https://www.wiwo.de/politik/konjunktur/denkfabrik-treiben-schlechte-produkte-die-versteckte-inflation/27704372.html}.
[5] Amanda Mull, "Your sweaters are garbage", in: *The Atlantic* (10 Oktober 2023); available online at: {https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2023/10/sweater-clothing-quality-natural-fibersfast-fashion/675600/}.
[6] Rotem Naftalovich/Marko Oydanich/Tolga Berkman/Andrew John Iskander, "Quality fade in medical device manufacturing: Thinness of airway breathing circuit plastic", in: *Biomedical Instrumentation and Technology* 55/4 (November 2021), pp. 118-120.
[7] Cory Doctorow, "The 'enshittification' of TikTok: Or how, exactly, platforms die", in: *Wired* (23 January 2023); available online at: {https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-platforms-cory-doctorow/}.

there yet. You could excuse these phenomena as excesses along the long march of progress, which correct themselves over time. Or you could simply dismiss them as insignificant, given the true global crises we are facing. Or you might just call of this the whining of a baby boomer.

And yes: market regulations, safety regulations, labels, certificates, and independent tests make it difficult for consumers to purchase genuinely dangerous products. Indeed, in some categories, there are no longer any truly bad products at all anymore, at least according to generally accepted criteria. For example, *Wirecutter*, the consumer magazine of the *New York Times*, found that you can't buy a bad camera anymore.[8] Manufacturers realised that when it comes to the mass market for taking everyday snapshots and family and holiday pictures, they just couldn't compete with smartphones. So they now concentrate on making expensive, well-made devices that can do things that smartphones can't. The result being a whole range of impressive devices – in a niche market. In many sectors of mass consumer goods, though, the situation is very different.

Many consumers have the nagging feeling that everyday objects are getting worse in peculiar ways. It's not an easy thing to talk about. With one exception: it is considered legitimate to criticise industrially produced food. Everyone hates this sector, and in Germany, industry insider Sebastian Lege fills multiple hours of airtime on the public broadcaster ZDF every week by gleefully unmasking the "tricks of the food industry". But his polemical tone sometimes comes at the expense of the facts, because if the industrial product is better than the artisan one (and that can even happen with bread), then his narrative ceases to hit the mark.[9]

But when talking about things other than food, criticising consumer commodities is viewed as retrograde ("everything was better in the good old days") or unimportant ("when you look at the big picture, we're actually doing pretty well nowadays". It's difficult to articulate a

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[8] Amadou Diallo/Ben Keough, "All cameras are good cameras", in: *The New York Times* (9 September 2024); available online at: {https://www.nytimes.com/wirecutter/reviews/all-cameras-are-good-cameras/}.
[9] Denise Snieguolė Wachter, "Täuscht Sebastian Lege seine Zuschauer?", in: *Stern* (29 August 2024); available online at: {https://www.stern.de/genuss/essen/sebastian-lege-in--5besseresser---taeuscht-er-seine-zuschauer--35018742.html}.

correct position on consumption because you can only take a position on it through consumption: *Why don't you buy something else if you don't like it.*

But I'm not willing to settle for that. Everyday objects are not unimportant, because good things do good things to us – and bad things do bad things. If we question the bad things, interrogate the conditions under which they are developed and distributed, it tells us something about the causes, mechanisms, and incentive systems that make them worse than they need to be.

I would like to refer to these things by the name of "junk". Junk as in the stuff that gathers in attics and cellars, inhabiting a limbo where things are abandoned but have not yet been thrown away. Junk is just waiting to be replaced. For it is the provocatively transient nature of objects such as the aforementioned hob that makes them junk. Whether it is cost-cutting that manifests in reductions in material quality or a free-wheeling simulation of progress that adds unnecessary complexity to products, the following maxim applies: the more desperately a product is trying to outdo its predecessor, the more likely it is to be junk.

We are condemned to consume; our economic system demands it of us. You can't not consume. But the ideal of sustainable, non-destructive consumption seems unattainable, politically, economically, logistically – and above all, psychologically, because consumption is ubiquitous. When you are defined as a consumer, it is difficult to bear being criticised for your consumption.

Our world is understood as a site of consumption. When department stores close, people immediately speak fearfully of the "desolation of city centres". It is a circular argument, as the philosopher Matthias Warkus has pointed out: at some point, "desolation" became synonymous with the closure of shops. In other words, we can only conceive of cities as sites of consumption; meaning that a critique of consumption becomes a critique of our mode of being as inhabitants of cities.

So-called “minimalists”, who live with as few possessions as possible and take up as little space as possible, market themselves as a counter-movement to this junk consumerism. And while this is indeed a trend, I’ve come across more documentaries about this lifestyle than actual minimalists themselves. The concept is also not particularly precise, in that it applies equally to self-sufficient dropouts and people with custom built-in cupboards in which everything disappears, allowing their home to always look perfectly clean.

All minimalists are supposedly united by the conviction that more possessions do not mean more happiness. It is a not-particularly-surprising capitalist paradox that even this trend has long since been made into a consumable commodity, with an aesthetic of clean lines that is only achievable for a tidy sum of money. The technical effort required to go from a conventional kitchen worktop to a truly smooth one, for example – one without protruding sinks and hobs – is considerable. Even extractor hoods that can be retracted into wall units come at a premium. Anything that makes technology invisible and has clean edges is expensive. Minimalism, understood as a design principle, means maximalism in terms of cost.

A particularly striking perversion of the minimalist idea is the tiny house, a contemporary interpretation of the remote cabin in the woods. However, these tiny, detached houses are neither an answer to the housing crisis nor are they particularly energy efficient. And even tiny houses need a parcel of land to stand on. In reality, these buildings are second or third homes for people with enough money not to have to worry about finding real solutions.

There is barely a single everyday activity for which expectations and reality are as far apart as in the field of consumption. I’m supposed to buy the right thing, not too much, not too cheap, not beyond my means, not below my standards. I’m supposed to consume responsibly, not exploit children in some dilapidated textile factory in Bangladesh, but also not the precarious logistics worker at the distribution centre on the outskirts of Berlin. I’m supposed to avoid ordering from Amazon, completely boycott it if possible. I’m supposed to walk straight past Starbucks, but shops like Aldi and Ikea are a little more complicated, because these chains

have an almost norm-creating market power: they set the standard, they are the Greenwich meantime against which German consumerism is measured. Since they are family owned (allegedly, in the case of Ikea), they are not subject to external control, for example by shareholders or investment funds that might want to enforce higher levels of sustainability (see Chapter 2). But when the Berlin hipster delicatessen paradise MarkthalleNeun gave the Aldi supermarket in the corner of the building an eviction notice, local residents protested. They felt this would be the final blow in the struggle against gentrification. In a neighbourhood where, according to *Zeit online*, 25 per cent of people depend on government benefits, they argued, an affordable grocery store was disappearing.[10] Three hundred residents came out to demonstrate for the poorest among them – and at the same time for a billion-dollar discount supermarket chain.

A fundamental critique of capitalism has made way – largely due to the fact that it has borne so little fruit – to a critique of individual consumption. This critique is not directed against a system but against the lifestyles of each of us as individuals. It is easier to make this critique as a moral demand, but it is also harder to bear. We resign ourselves to our fate as consumers, do something *for the economy* by buying things, occasionally accentuated by a particularly rational purchasing decision, a coffee with particularly strong fair-trade credentials.

Those who consume, destroy. Even a circular economy would generate waste that cannot be recycled. Of course, such a form of economic activity would be preferable to the throwaway economy. Instead, though, we get a tiny bit of the right life in the wrong one: coffee at a price that is enough for farmers to live on – to live in poverty, that is. And the coffee will of course continue to come from overseas. A touch less suffering, destruction in moderation, a little bit of peace.

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[10] Alexander Krex, "Aldi 36", in: *Zeit online* (2 May 2019); available online at: {https://www.zeit.de/entdecken/2019-04/markthalle-neunaldi-gentrifizierung-berlin-kreuzberg-protest/komplettansicht}.

We have destroyed the planet through consumption, and now we're supposed to consume it back to health. However, this demand that is placed on consumers cannot be fulfilled so long as the manufacturers are not also held accountable. If consumers are not given any leniency for their behaviour, then manufacturers certainly shouldn't receive any. How are we supposed to do the right thing with the wrong products? Because not only do goods not get continuously better, they never get any better than they absolutely have to. And all too often, they are deliberately worse than that.

According to capitalist orthodoxy, products that are recognised as inferior should be quickly surrounded by better products, which eventually squeeze them out of the market. However, several factors prevent this self-correction: the digitisation of entire product categories (which overwhelms companies, customers, and regulatory authorities alike), market consolidation (which reduces competition), the shift away from competition between products to competition between "brand ecosystems"; new distribution channels that make comparison difficult (brand-specific shops instead of specialist retailers with expertise in a particular sector, online retailers with untransparent and often useless reviews), and the shifts in consumer behaviour that have resulted from these channels, which led to the loss of importance among specialist retailers in the first place. Since there is an enormous informational asymmetry between the manufacturer and the customer, specialist retailers that mediate between the two sides are actually more important than ever. In reality, though, what we find is almost exclusively large chains with rapid staff turnover, whose expertise can be outdone with a quick Google search. And why should we pay extra for specialist retailers when the knowledge they offer is no better than the scraps of information gathered online?

The stupid thing about capitalist orthodoxy is that it contains a fundamental flaw: a good product for customers can be a bad product for the producer.

One thing that contributes to the junkification of the world is a form of competition which, more often than not, is little more than theatre (see Chapter 2). It is the outcome of a

discourse on progress and innovation that is entirely controlled by businesses (see Chapter 3). Companies sell questionable products to customers who are led through an arena of glittering, nonsensical innovations (chapter 7), while at the same time being urged by politicians to consume more morally, the goal of which is no less than the salvation of the planet. National distribution systems make it largely impossible to make international comparisons, meaning that we often only get products that we (begrudgingly) accept (Chapter 8). And while we let telephone robots assure us how important our call is to them (Chapter 9) as they keep us on hold, we are bombarded by pompous apps with pushy notifications or pestered by Schubert-playing washing machines, ensuring that what little remains of our attention is well and truly fried (Chapter 6).

Critique of everyday objects is nothing new. And the strategies for restricting the junkification of the world even just a little are also not new. For example, at the beginning of the 20th century, the German Werkbund worked to bring about a collaboration between industry and artists that today would be near impossible to imagine. The aim was to produce better consumer goods. But little of this initiative remains (Chapter 5). And unfortunately, we customers continue to participate eagerly in this process of junkification when we buy new things that we don't actually need and pat ourselves on the back for the outstanding sustainability ratings of these products (Chapter 4). If it weren't so unpleasant, if it didn't seem to compromise our identity, you could almost start to doubt the authenticity – and possibly even the legitimacy – of all our needs, the satisfaction of which has led to this junkification of the world (Chapter 10).

The stove with the absurd controls is from AEG, by the way – well, that's what the label says, anyway. I don't know how many consumers are aware of this, but the brand has nothing to do with the time-honoured company that Emil Rathenau (father of the industrialist and politician Walther Rathenau, who was assassinated in 1922), founded in Berlin in the 19th century. The

rights to use to the brand are now licensed by Electrolux Global Brand Licensing, and are sold to countless manufacturers, who use it to sell a broad range of appliances. Which really defeats the purpose of a trademark, namely, to reliably indicate who the manufacturer of a product is, according to which there is something genuinely at stake in the relationship with the customer: the reputation of the manufacturer. The brand was once a promise that the customer could rely on, whether in terms of the quality of the product itself, the level of customer service, or the availability of spare parts.

Of course, there is no doubt that it is possible to produce stoves and washing machines without a hundred years of experience and tradition. But there must be something enticing about these old brands, otherwise they wouldn't be flogging them off to manufacturers left, right, and centre. It's a delusional relationship that industry and consumers alike have produced: the manufacturers tell us nostalgic branded fairy tales, and because of the lack of alternatives, there must be enough people who believe them. What's more, the different brands offer people the illusion of a freedom of choice that doesn't actually exist. A small number of suppliers produce almost identical products that are stamped with different logos, and in many sectors, oligopolies dominate the market. Competition is largely performative. It's like professional wrestling, the fight is well choreographed and the winner has been decided in advance. Anyone who buys kitchen appliances from Bosch, Neff, Siemens, Constructa, or Gaggenau is ultimately buying from BSH Hausgeräte GmbH. Bauknecht and Privileg belong to Whirlpool; AEG and Zanussi to Electrolux.

Volkswagen plays the brand game with VW, Audi, Porsche, Skoda, Seat, and Cupra. "Common-parts strategies", "modular group systems", "platform strategies" – there are many terms for selling the same things to different customers at different prices. When the Bang & Olufsen logo is emblazoned on the speakers in a luxury car, the system actually comes from Harman, which in turn is owned by Samsung (as are the audio brands AKG and JBL). The performance of progress, which feigns a forward motion, is accompanied by a performance of

competition that pretends that consumers have a choice. The insane thing about markets that are aimed at end users is their charade-like nature, where everyone makes believe – while the planet burns for real.

However, the notion of free consumer choice remains strategically important because it allows the moral burden of correct behaviour to be placed on individual consumers: it is not industry that bears the responsibility for the bad products they produce, but the consumers who want the bad products.

The British sociologist Don Slater wrote in 1997 that from the 1980s on, the *consumer* came to be stylised as the "hero of the hour" in industrialised nations. Economic growth was guaranteed by their spending and borrowing; political decisions (such as those made under Thatcherism) were designed to facilitate as much consumption as possible, with consumers imagined as radical individualists.[11]

But as they say in *Spider Man*: "With great power comes great responsibility." If we are to be the heroes of the hour, shouldn't we behave even more responsibly? Perversely, however, when it comes to carefree shopping, it is crucial to see ourselves not as part of a (global) community but as acting in accordance with our individual needs. And if you feel like you can't make a difference as an individual anyway, consumption becomes much easier. In this vein, designer Jonas Stallmeister adapted the famous phrase to articulate the speculative hypothesis: "With great powerlessness comes irresponsibility?"[12]

One of the points of departure for this book was the assumption that we as consumers need to be empowered to recognise good products and to reject junk, through a reinterpretation of the good old German discipline of *Warenkunde*, or, to coin an Anglophone discipline, commodity

[11] Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, Cambridge/GB: Polity 2002, p. 10.
[12] Jonas Stallmeister (@stallmeister.bsky.social), "Grade eine Idee von Verständnis für Leute, denen alles egal ist", Bluesky-Post (19 November 2024); available online at: {https://bsky.app/profile/stallmeister.bsky.social/post/3lbb35lbza225}.

science. To be sure, we cannot resolve the question of the "right" form of consumption by way of simple product recommendations. Consumption is much more than purchasing the "right" goods. It is one of the major arenas in which the conflict between individual and society is played out. If I decide to buy butter or a plant-based spread, or if I buy an annual train ticket or purchase a car, I make individual decisions, but I don't make them in a vacuum. I like the taste of butter much better than the best butter substitute, but in addition to milk, large dairy producers also produce an alarming amount of CO_2. With a car, I can quickly drive to a lake or transport bulky items around town, but mass car ownership means even more CO_2, noisy roads, and dreary car parks instead of children playing in the shade of cooling trees.

When consuming, my rational self, which wants to do the right thing for society and the planet, collides with my irrational self, which is primarily concerned with itself and thinks that this new bike, these new sneakers, this new phone, are amazing, d just *has* to have them.

Ultimately, though, looming above all these minor and major consumer conflicts that we constantly have to fight on an intrapersonal level is the demand to refrain from consumption, because a moral form of consumption would obviously be to not consume at all. Consumers in a strict sense should ideally no longer exist. They should be viewed as users of resources that are borrowed from the future. But how is that supposed to work, when these loans are meaningless, frustrating, obsolete junk? How is that possible when the production of junk is rewarded?