

Outline the key features of the Frankfurt School in relation to media theory.

The Frankfurt School was fundamental in the introduction of a structured and intelligible theory of the media within their own historical context, and the development of contemporary theory having since emerged has been heavily influenced by them. The main themes they deal with are; notions of culture (and mass culture), technology and its influence on the production of contemporary culture, post modernism and consumer society. The predominant thinkers associated with the school draw upon Marxist teachings but seek to extend and update them into a modern context as they recognised the flaws of Marxism evident in the rise of fascism in the 1920s-1940s.

Surrounding the birth of the school was the rise of fascism in Europe and particularly the manipulation of culture and use of media propaganda by the Nazi party, the era of Fordism and mass production and the emergence of an entertainment industry. With reference to these the Frankfurt school developed interests in the political economy of the media, the cultural analysis of texts and analysis of audience reception. They felt that a focus on political economy was becoming redundant and began to assess how ideas and beliefs were being transmitted by popular culture. The ideological effects of the growing mass media and communication sector were that the media began to 'control' the ideas of the audience. The audience become imprinted with the notion that a capitalist regime is in their interests as well as perpetuating ideologies on family, leisure time and society that are, in fact, beneficial solely to the bourgeoisie.

The media instigates a gradual process of making the audience believe that certain things are in their interests- a method which ensures that there will be little resistance or criticism. The culture industry must ensure that the audience remains interested in their output with an attentive but passive and uncritical reception; the power asserted over the audience is in a very subtle form. Through the analysis of texts, contemporary and historical, there is an identifiable feature that dominates throughout the majority; the reinforcement and strengthening of dominant ideologies. Typically within the text will be the centralisation of the (predominantly male) hero, the conflict threatening the status quo and the subsequent reconciliation and resolution. Culture becomes the new ¹'opiate of the masses' where even escapism through film and literature is not free from the influence of this 'propaganda'. The culture industry will not challenge established dominant ideology, simply reproduce them to the extent that leisure time pursuits simply act as sustenance for 'capacities for labour'. Popular music is similar in that, with scarce exception, the lyrical focus will be (heterosexual) love; reinforcing the ideal of the family. Deviance from the formula traditionally provokes outrage. Adorno claims that the culture industry is now so effective in pacifying the masses that ²'their consciousness is further developed retrogressively'. He further states:

its effectiveness lies in the promotion and exploitation

¹ Karl Marx.

² Adorno, T, (ibid.; pg. 91)

of the ego-weakness to which the powerless members of contemporary society, with its concentration of power, are condemned... It's no coincidence that cynical American film producers are heard to say that their pictures must take into consideration the level of eleven-year-olds. In doing so they would very much like to make adults into eleven-year-olds.

The theory of the power of the media evolved from the examination of the use of radio by Goebbels, Hitler's chief propagandist, in 1930s Germany as a political tool. Horkheimer was especially interested in how the Nazis were able to make their agenda appear 'reasonable'. The progression from suggestions of anti-Semitism to full blown anti-Semitic propaganda was instrumental in outlining the Frankfurt School's theories which subsequently threatened the school itself as it was founded by middle class left-wing Jews; the sworn enemies of the Nazi party. The school was forced to relocate to California via Geneva and New York respectively. It was whilst in California that the school's thinkers began to realise that the media was used to entertain as well as to promote propaganda. They began to concede that the role of entertainment was not necessarily propaganda but more a method of distracting the audience from the real problems of social life or, in Marx's view, to pacify them and thus prevent them revolting.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer speak of 'culture industry' as a replacement for the term, 'mass culture' as it relates more to their theory of the industrialisation of culture. Industries exist to produce popular culture whether it is in the form of television, music, books or cinema. Adorno states that ³'the customer is not king'; not of primary concern but secondary as they are being acted upon by forces from above, echoing the sentiments of Marx on the conflict of having bourgeois ideology forced upon the proletariat. This industry is embedded into capitalism, as is any industry, integrating consumers from above; the priority being the production of goods that are financially profitable and profitable in the sense that they are self-perpetuating. The consumer guides these productions but the Frankfurt School argues that consumer demands are themselves manipulated by the producers of the culture industry; the audience is 'told' what they desire. The industry of culture serves ⁴'an ideological function, ensuring capitalist hegemony, providing a bland and undemanding popular culture' evident today in the pseudo-individualistic state of popular music, regurgitating the same formula over and again (eg. ⁵"It's the same, same old song with a different beat from a different drum").

Culture no longer exists as an amalgamation of ideas and norms but becomes subdivided into material culture and intellectual culture; high and low culture. To distinguish between levels of culture suggests that they have different levels of value. Low art is manufactured as worthless fodder but high art has meaning. Benjamin notes that great art has 'an aura' - thus elevating the artefact and consequently the people who enjoy it onto a higher plain. This in itself helps to perpetuate the hierarchies of the class system. Traditionally middle class pursuits such as the opera or art galleries command a higher level of respect and in turn alienate themselves

³ Adorno, T, (1991;pg.85)

⁴ Penguin Dictionary of Sociology.

⁵ (Brian Holland/ Lamont Dozier/ Edward Holland Jr.) © 1965 Motown Record Company.

from the lower ends of culture where the people of lower social class entertain themselves. The suggestion is that the working class would not be able to appreciate higher culture as they have not been educated with this in mind – they are educated to fulfil a role within the capitalist machine. Marxists argue that the sole purpose of the proletariat is to maintain their position, which in turn maintains the position of the bourgeoisie; if they were educated to the standard of being able to appreciate high culture then they could become a threat to the social structure. In essence high art provokes thought; low art stifles it.

The rapid progression of technology has made the production of various art forms more accessible to the public. There is hardware and software available that can enable a person with little or no classical training to produce complex pieces of work. This accessibility devalues these productions yet further in the eye of Benjamin as it removes the ‘aura’ associated with great art. However, Benjamin does stress the potential of ‘a democratic and participatory’ quality to contemporary popular culture as opposed to the ‘repressive and authoritarian’ theory, characterised by other thinkers of the school. The availability of these technologies is inherently related to the capitalist system, however, as they become merely another product fulfilling a role and, in turn, helping to integrate the working classes into the system. The ability to buy the things that they desire, or are told to desire diminishes the conscious desire to overthrow the capitalist system. The ‘false needs’ of the working classes, recognised by Marcuse, tie in with the Marxist concept of a culture of commodity fetishism. The role of false needs is to suppress mankind’s true desire to be creative and independent; to act as a ‘substitute gratification’. False needs can be fulfilled and simultaneously keep mankind’s true needs unsatisfied and capitalism is sustained. Adorno writes that,⁶ “the real secret of success... is the mere reflection of what one pays in the market for the product. The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert”.

The ideas promoted by The Frankfurt School were very ahead of their time and came to be embraced by many contemporary thinkers. Marshall McLuhan focused strongly on technology in his work and spoke of an ‘electric society’ where television began to determine political outlook. He believed that the evolution of technology was grounded within strict guidelines set by those in power. The Glasgow Media Group emerged as a natural progression from The Frankfurt School noting that television stations were bound by law to impartiality but found the majority to be biased to the extent of violation of their obligations, in the favour of the middle classes. In the heat of the industrial action of the 1970s, ⁷television reporting placed the blame of strikes on the excessive wage demands of the workers at the rate of 8:1. Raymond Williams stresses the existence of a cultural elite, a theory synonymous with The Frankfurt School’s emphasis of high/low culture. He believed there to be certain people in society who decide what culture is; when, how and why certain things may or may not be acceptable. Criticism of the school focuses on the lack of empirical evidence provided and thus all that remains is theory. Their theories have acted as frameworks for many contemporary left-wing thinkers and groups who have built upon the ideas first realised within the school. In more and more cases, with progressive funding, groups such as The Glasgow Media Group have been able to conduct extensive

⁶ Adorno, T, *The Culture of Industry*. (1991; pg.34)

⁷ *Bad News*, Glasgow Media Group study.

research and provide the empirical evidence that the school has been criticised for lacking).

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