

Discuss the view that Adorno and Horkheimer's arguments are unduly pessimistic and irrelevant to contemporary society and modern day understanding of the cultural industries

The purpose of this essay is to analyse Adorno and Horkheimer's views upon Mass Culture and the 'Culture Industries', juxtaposing their arguments against examples of contemporary cultural production today, and whether their arguments are unduly pessimistic and irrelevant in relation to modern day understanding. I shall assess the validity and relevance of their arguments bearing in mind the social context of the time in which they were writing and looking at the criticism of their views. Predominantly, I shall be focusing upon the way in which Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer view the Cultural Industries and the context in which they derived these conclusions, illustrating their views specifically using examples from their essay 'The Culture Industry-Enlightenment as Mass Deception' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979) and more specific examples from each theorist themselves.

The Frankfurt School's position broadly was that capitalism ("false consciousness") and the culture industry easily fools people. Their idea of reality was that of bourgeois society controlling almost everything under capitalism, that culture is processed through the culture industry. It criticised Enlightenment ideas of progressive culture, harmony, authenticity, and culture encompassing the best creative efforts of people who are authentically free, "The Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant." (Adorno, T & M. Horkheimer (1979:1) *The Culture Industry-Enlightenment as Mass Deception* in *Dialect of Enlightenment*).

When studying the work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and their views of mass culture one must consider the social context of the time. It is important to establish and give a brief history of the social situation, which may have contributed to their critical approaches and pessimistic attitude towards mass culture and the effect, which it had upon the audience. This may also be useful to bear in mind, when applying the relevance of their arguments in relation to modern day understanding of the cultural industries. The members of the Frankfurt School were writing during 1930s Germany, at the time of the rising of the Nazis social oppression of the Jews. Victims of European fascism, the Frankfurt School experienced first hand the ways that the Nazis used the instruments of the Mass Culture to produce submission to fascist culture and society. While in exile in the United States, the members of the Frankfurt School came to believe that American "popular culture" was also highly ideological and worked to promote the interests of American capitalism. Controlled by giant corporations, the culture industries were organised according to the structures of standardised mass production, churning out mass-produced products that generated a highly commercial system of culture, which in turn sold the values, life styles, and institutions of "the American way of life".

Adorno and Horkheimer's attitude towards mass culture is clearly depicted in the title of their essay 'The Culture Industry-Enlightenment as Mass Deception' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979). They argue that cultural products are commodities produced by the Culture Industry, which, whilst claiming to be democratic, individualistic and diversified, is in actuality authoritarian, conformist and highly standardised, "Culture impresses the same stamp on everything. Films, radio and magazines make up a

system which is uniform as a whole in every part”, (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979:120). The diversity of the products of the culture industries is an illusion for “something is provided for all so none escape”, (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 123).

Adorno and Horkheimer coined the phrase ‘Culture Industry’ to demonstrate to the people around them, who believed that the arts were independent of industry and commerce, that they were in actual fact cultural items used in the same way as other industries produced goods. The uppermost aim being that of profit, rationalised organisation procedures came first and dictated the product. “Under capitalism all production is for the market: goods are produced not in order to meet human needs and desires, but for the sake of profit, for the sake of acquiring further capital”. They used the term “culture industry” to signify the process of the industrialisation of mass-produced cultural artefacts within the context of industrial production, in which commodities of the culture industries exhibited the same features as other products of mass production: co modification, standardisation and massification. They asserted that cultural objects are produced in much the same way as other industries produce other objects. Cultural production becomes a routine and standardised operation, which in turn results in standardised passive responses. The assembly-line production of cars, for example, is analogous to that of music or film. The standardisation of production creates standardised and interchangeable cultural objects, which leads inevitably to standardisation of consumption. Consumers are neither “active” nor “creative”, but instead are reduced to a homogeneous, undifferentiated mass, responding to cultural objects in a predictable, uniform manner (Negus, 1977).

It is at this point that I would like to focus my attention upon cultural production today with reference to the essay title assessing whether or not Adorno and Horkheimer’s arguments are irrelevant to contemporary society and modern day understanding of the cultural industries. I shall illustrate my answer with reference to advertising, and then further on throughout the essay switch my attention to Adorno’s views upon popular music. Adorno and Horkheimer believed that ideology permeates everything seeping into the material goods produced for exchange. It is through packaging, labelling and above all advertising, that pervades the very material of the commodities we buy. It is in this way that Adorno argues that commodities come to absorb the aesthetic sheen that commercial advertising lends to them: “Reality becomes its own ideology through the spell cast by its faithful duplication. This is how the technological veil and the myth of the positive are woven. If the real becomes an image insofar as in its particularity it becomes as equivalent to the whole as one Ford car is to all others of the same range, then the image, on the other hand, turns into immediate reality”, (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1991:55). According to the two theorists the Culture Industry’s products are always standardised, formulaic and stereotypical, however, they connect their audiences through cultivating the distinctive feature or accidental detail (much in the same way as music), “The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use products even though they see through them” (Adorno, 1973:167).

Adorno and Horkheimer referred ‘popular culture’ rather as ‘mass culture’ since it was transmitted via the mass media to a large undifferentiated audience, subsequently providing a uniform supply of cultural commodities without much product differentiation. This argument builds on the assumption that the cultural industries create the cultural needs of the common man. Cultural consumption consequently

becomes a passive and alienating activity since the customers take no part in the production process. Adorno believed that the customer is not the master nor the empowered element in all this, but instead that he or she becomes the manipulated object, "The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object." (1991: p.33). Referring to Marx's original theory of commodity fetishism, Adorno once wrote that "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 paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert" (1991: p. 34).

Relating the theorists' arguments to cultural production today, it is interesting to look at the advertising industry and its effects upon the audience. Adorno and Horkheimer's experiences in Europe sensitised them to the danger of the manipulative techniques of advertising and propaganda in the consumer society, and the way in which it could be developed to usher in some form of Fascism in the political sphere, "The ruthless unity in the culture industry is evidence of what will happen in politics." (1979: p. 126). They asserted that culture was no longer a form of creative expression, but instead had become a standardised manufactured product, which was almost indistinguishable from the advertising that surrounded it, "The assembly line character of the culture industry, the synthetic, planned method of turning out its products (factory-like not only in the studio, but more or less in the compilation of cheap biographies, pseudo-documentary novels, and hit songs) is very suited to advertising...Advertising and the culture industry merge technically as well as economically. In both cases the same thing can be seen in innumerable places, and the mechanical repetition of the same cultural product has come to be the same as that of the propaganda slogan." (1979: p. 123)

Adorno's view of modern culture was pessimistic through and through. He believed that the progress of Enlightenment was a calamity to mankind, not just on the mechanistic outward level, but also on the inward, intuitive level as well. The main source to Adorno's interpretation of modernity, which I have chosen to focus upon, is taken from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1979, (1947)), which he composed together with Max Horkheimer during the Frankfurt School's exile in America. The work is significant in that it states that all parts of modern culture is unconsciously penetrated by the "self-destruction of the Enlightenment" (p. xiii). His later academic writings were equally pessimistic, for example, in "The Schema of Mass Culture" (1991) he paid particular attention to the collapse of the difference between culture and practical life (Bernstein, 1991). In "Culture Industry Reconsidered" (1991) he repeated that "the total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment" (p.92)

According to Adorno the modern man should be viewed as having a "fallen nature" (p.xiv). This fallen nature was apparent in all aspects of modern culture; in the means of production, in man's thought, in society's superstructure and in the trace of history. Enlightenment allowed no room in its redeeming sense. A vast majority of Adorno's critical theory was based upon his notion of the "culture industry", a term which he claimed to prefer over "mass culture", as he felt that this falsely implies "a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art" (Adorno, 1991, p.85). Adorno claimed that the whole and the parts of the modern world have no choice but to conform to the culture industry, "The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979

p.126). Consequently, “monopoly” and “sameness”, according to Adorno, contained some important and prominent features of the culture industry. It was Adorno’s claim that what enlightenment was expected to bring about, that is pluralism and demythologization, turned out to be in fact the contrary. He believed that man is subject to conformity rather than choice, and that myth is still a predominant guide, although it has now taken a rather different guise as opposed to previous ages all absorbing Christianity. The underlying and most important assumption here, that Adorno makes, is that all things take place on the unconscious level. Man may appear free to think, but in reality he is not, “Freedom to choose an ideology – since ideology always reflects economic coercion – everywhere proves to be freedom to choose what is always the same” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979, pp. 166-167). He believed that if someone wants to object to the present order of the culture industry, the only way is through “realistic dissidence”, which is in reality not a threat to the culture industry but rather reinforcement (p.132).

Another important characteristic of Adorno’s view of modernity and culture is his absolute disbelief in progress, that the trajectory of modern history is unequivocally making its way to the worse. He firmly asserts that what gave rise to a certain protest against the establishment from Romanticism to Expressionism is no longer appreciated or acknowledged. Being a very keen art critic as previously mentioned, Adorno also gave several examples to prove his point in this regard. Broad attention was given to the field of music, where jazz in particular became the materialised representation of how enlightenment deteriorates. Adorno’s essay, ‘On popular music’ makes three specific claims about popular music. The first is that he claims that it is ‘standardised’. Standardisation, as Adorno points out, “extends from the most general features to the most specific ones”, the result being that they are basically formulaic and similar. “When jazzing up Mozart he changes him not only when he is too serious or too difficult but when he harmonises the melody in a different way, perhaps more simply than is customary now”, (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979, p.123). Once a musical pattern has proved successful it is exploited to commercial exhaustion, culminating in the ‘crystallisation of standards’. Adorno then goes on to point out that in order to conceal standardisation the music industry engage in what he calls ‘pseudo-individualisation’, “Standardisation of song hits keep the customers in line by doing their listening for them as it were. Pseudo-individualisation, for its part, keeps them in line by making them forget what they listen to is already listened for them ‘pre-digested’. That is an incidental difference in music makes them seem distinctive, but in fact they are not.

Adorno makes a second claim that popular music promotes passive listening. Whereas serious music such as Beethoven plays to the pleasure of the imagination, offering an engagement with the world as it could be, popular music is the ‘non-productive correlate’ to life in the office or on the factory floor. The ‘strain and boredom’ of work lead men and women to the ‘avoidance of effort’ in their time. Denied ‘novelty’ in their work time and too exhausted for it in their leisure time, “they crave a stimulant – popular music satisfies that craving” (Adorno 1990: p. 306). The ‘regression of listening’ was also a major concern for Adorno because for him, it was synonymous with the incapability of most people to participate in concentrated listening. He argues “the counterpart of the fetishism of music is a regression of listening” (1991: p. 40). The musical audience resigns themselves to whatever is offered, rejecting freedom of choice and the responsibility for intellectual perception

of music. Therefore a 'regression of listening' among consumers means needs are being manipulated by outside forces. Adorno cites the example of the 'jitterbugs' groups "from the mass of the retarded who differentiate themselves by pseudo activity and nevertheless make the regression more strikingly visible... They call themselves jitterbugs, as if they simultaneously wanted to affirm and mock their loss of individuality, their transformation into beetles whirring around in fascination" (1991: p. 46).

In contrast, critical art for Adorno is that which is not orientated to the market and challenges the standards of intelligibility of a reified society. For Adorno, an example would be the atonal music of Schoenberg, which he argues, forces us to consider new ways of looking at the world. "Serious modern art offers a model of resistance to the totalitarian pressure of the world". This period of crisis, he believed, created a short-lived opportunity: it was the period of Beethoven, whom he idolised. It was in Beethoven's music that he saw the 'Promise of Utopia' and the 'Creative Autonomy, which he regarded as a hallmark of 'Great Art'. Since then, it has been all downhill: the stranglehold of the dominant classes of society on the production of meaning have turned art into a 'circle of manipulation, in which the people clamour for what they are going to get anyhow', and this has confined any valid counter-cultural statements to the inaccessible avant-garde.

However, his privileged concepts about production ignored any analysis of how cultural materials are received and used: to him, audiences are just faceless, uncritical, undifferentiated mass; however, much research has proved the contrary. His own musical taste was bourgeois and his condemnation of the repetitive and formulaic ignores the fact that folk music from all over the world use repetitive forms, which emphasise human commonality (especially work songs) as well as providing a framework for improvisation and other performance arts. Performances of songs produced in the most restrictive settings can be, and have been transformed by the nuances and human and social understandings of artists as different as Billy Holiday and more recently Eminem. Another interesting point is that although he lived into the seventies, his analysis is confined to the mainstream mass-produced music of 'Tin Pan Alley' in the thirties and forties; he took no account at that period of 'alternative' forms such as blues or gospel, neither did he respond in any way to the rock'n'roll explosion of the fifties and sixties. He has created a monolithic model of popular music and culture, useful in many areas and with the clarity of simplicity, but insensitive to cultural, social and linguistic differences.

French sociologists Morin (1962) and Miegé (1979) rejected Adorno and Horkheimer's pessimistic interpretation of the Cultural Industries. They discarded their nostalgic attachment to pre-industrial forms of production. Miegé argued instead that in fact the introduction of industrialisation and new technologies into cultural production did indeed lead to commodification, however, he asserted that it also led to exciting new directions and innovations, and that ultimately commodification of culture was a much more ambivalent process than was allowed for by Adorno and Horkheimer's cultural pessimism. Significantly the critics were concerned with the limited and incomplete nature of attempts to extend capitalism into the realm of culture. They saw the cultural industries instead as contested and a zone of continuing struggling.

When drawing upon the cultural relevance of Adorno and Horkheimer's claims about cultural production, it is evident that the clarity and cutting edge of their criticism is still widely respected today, despite the narrowness of their vision and the fact that some of their ideas are tied closely to the historical situation they were living and writing in. In approaching mainstream Western Culture like the Eurovision Song Contest, MTV and the marketing of Michael Jackson, Adorno and Horkheimer were able to offer a more scathing and critical eye upon what is 'mediocre' or what is true and genuine talent. Referring to the relevance of Adorno's arguments concerning advertising, I firmly believe that their views are still somewhat applicable. This is clearly demonstrated through the number of advertising campaigns bombarding us daily, with false hopes and unrealistic expectations, promising us a more fulfilled and better life if we purchase these products. Advertising is now the media form most encountered most of the time, from urban billboards, on commercially funded television, in magazines and newspapers or even pushed through our front doors. It is evident that Adorno and Horkheimer envisaged the audience as a mass of passive consumers, unable to think for themselves. They are easily manipulated and persuaded to buy mass produced commodities. Therefore exposing the consumer to commercial exploitation, this in turn motivates mass culture. Mass culture, in their view, is consequently debasing for the consumer whilst they assert that high culture, in contrast, broadens the views of the consumer. However, audience members actively choose messages they attend to and how they interpret them. Therefore experience of media content can be participatory, that is the audience's reactions are fed back to the media producers, and experience of media messages is a social activity, even for those who receive the message on their own.

The Frankfurt theory of the Culture Industry articulates a major historical shift to an era in which mass consumption and culture was indispensable to producing a consumer society based on homogeneous needs and desires for mass produced products and a mass society based on social organisation and homogeneity. It is culturally the era of a highly controlled network radio and television, insipid top forty pop music and glossy magazines. They were also reacting to the culture shock of their own transplanting to Hollywood, and to a very different view of culture such as Hollywood films, national magazines and other mass produced cultural artefacts. Nevertheless, they did articulate the important social roles of media culture during a specific regime of capital and provided a model which is still of use today, of a highly commercial and technologically advanced culture that serves the needs of dominant corporate interests, plays a major role in ideological reproduction and in enculturating individual into the dominant system of needs, thought and behaviour.

There is no denying that the Frankfurt School Theorists were pessimistic, so much so that the blind spots in their approach are almost impossible to ignore. It is important to recognise that there are indeed meaningful pleasures to be had through participation in popular culture and that it can have a critical edge. One also knows that consumers are not always 'passive dupes' and that they do indeed have some capacity to resist manipulation and have the ability to interpret and even fashion new and unexpected meanings from standardised cultural products. It seems evident to me that we are left with three predominant characteristics that summarise Adorno's view of modernity; a mankind with a collectively corrupted mind, an industry with exploitative motives and a history with a collapsing progress. It is therefore evident that the natural way to read Adorno in all of these matters is that he was careful to provide a thorough

interpretation of modern culture and all of its shortcomings. The next logical step would then be to look for proposals for change, whether it be on the theoretical or the practical level. However, Adorno never reached that step as he was permanently stuck in his pessimistic interpretations, his subjectivist explanations and his anti-revolutionary nihilism.

In conclusion, however, I would like to point out that one can hardly fault their pessimistic attitude towards contemporary society and modern cultural industries bearing in mind the argument which I have posed throughout the essay. Fleeing the rationalised mass slaughter and political control of fascism for Taylorist production and mass consumption of modern capitalism, Adorno and Horkheimer despaired at the absence of anything like a global, global revolutionary resistance to what they saw as the 'insomniac rationality of capitalist exploitation'. I do firmly assert that their analysis of the Cultural Industries is still very much applicable today. If anything even more so with the increase of advertising due to the vast technological advancements made alone in the last few decades. In the spectacular stupidity of the latest Star Wars movies or the banality of Celebrity Big Brother, Adorno and Horkheimer might ask us to see the final failure of the Enlightenment project (or, rather, its totalitarian success). The technological management of popular culture centralises power in the hands of those few corporations that control its production and distribution. The culture industry claims to serve the consumers' needs, manipulating them to conform to what it produces – the latest summer blockbuster, the situation comedy, "reality" TV. Variations in consumer income and taste are rationally organised and modifications to the standard form are carefully calculated to ensure that each consumer "choose the category of mass product turned out for his type". Although it provides pleasures for consumers, the culture industry ultimately serves to distract people from the excesses and inequalities of the market.

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