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Source: *New German Critique*, No. 6 (Autumn, 1975), pp. 3-11

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/487649>

Accessed: 06-08-2017 20:08 UTC

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Introduction to Adorno

by Andreas Huyssen

In printing Adorno's "Culture Industry Reconsidered," an essay which sums up ideas first developed in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*,¹ *New German Critique's* intention is not only to elaborate again theories of manipulation, reification and administration of culture and their obvious negative implications for human praxis. Nor is our interest merely archival or historical; we are not publishing this essay simply because Adorno was one of the first to use critical Marxist thought to illuminate Western mass culture, which for years had been dismissed by conservative culture critics with elitist moralizing. It might make some sense to use the essay for its implicit attack on the impressionistic and mindless thesis of pluralism, current in American research on mass culture and popular taste, a thesis which predominates in the *Journal of Popular Culture* (1967 ff.) and in the recently published study by Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture* (1974). However, it can not be considered a major task of contemporary Marxist research on mass culture to criticize once again the ideologically affirmative thesis of pluralism. How then can this essay—carried by the Hessian Broadcasting System in the spring of 1963 as a contribution to the International Radio University Program and later published in *Ohne Leitbild* (1967)—relate to present-day debates? Does it raise questions about mass culture and public sphere which still concern us today, even if we wish to abandon the conceptual framework of Adorno's philosophy?

First, Adorno's concept of culture industry must be placed in a historical context and explained in relationship to other theories of mass culture as developed by Kracauer, Brecht and Benjamin. A historical understanding of of Adorno's position is all the more important since Adorno consistently avoided historic specificity in his work, though his thought unmistakably developed in reaction to historical events. The striking time-and-spacelessness of "Culture Industry Reconsidered" points to Adorno's "secret hostility toward history."² This hostility in turn reflects his rejection of the determinate negation as a key concept of the philosophy of history, and indicates his insistence on negativity and refusal as crucial elements of a

1. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1971). English translation published by Seabury Press (New York, 1974).

2. Hans Mayer, "Theodor W. Adorno," *Der Repräsentant und der Märtyrer* (Frankfurt am Main, 1971), p. 165.

modern aesthetic. Nevertheless, his concept of culture industry emerged from concrete experiences, largely the same experiences that shaped the aesthetics of Kracauer, Brecht and Benjamin. Essentially, Adorno's theory of culture industry draws on three sources: the cultural sphere during the stabilization phase of the Weimar Republic, with its Americanism and its *Technikkult* (cult of technology),³ the triumph of fascism in Germany and the cultural shock experienced in the United States after emigration.⁴ Kracauer, Brecht and Benjamin, who lived in Berlin, welcomed the pervasive rationalization and collectivization of Weimar society and culture as a phase which capitalism had to go through before running aground on its own contradictions. Adorno, on the other hand, living in the "non-contemporary" (*ungleichzeitig*) capital of the perished Austrian Empire, Vienna, viewed the rational disenchantment of the world under the sign of Taylorism as a standardization of everyday life, part of the enlightenment's self-destruction which, in his mind, contributed to the rise of fascism. For Adorno, culture industry is nothing more than one aspect of that dialectic of enlightenment in which technical rationality has become the rationality of domination *per se*,⁵ and in contrast to both Brecht and Benjamin he does not differentiate technical rationality in a capitalist system from that in a socialist society.

Western culture industry, in Adorno's view, is a symptom of at least latent totalitarianism. Historical specificity, to be sure, gets lost in such generalizations. Thus the section on culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, subtitled "Enlightenment as Mass Deception," time and again draws parallels between the system of domination in the United States and that of German fascism, without, however, equating the two. Though this comparison is no longer made in "Culture Industry Reconsidered," culture industry is still viewed as symptomatic of an authoritarian state. The catchwords are no longer barbarism and fascism, but rather *status quo* and conformity (*Anpassung*), reflecting the economic and political stabilization of capitalist industrial societies since the end of World War II. Another possible explanation of this change in terminology would be that Adorno was consciously avoiding radical formulations in 1963 because of the conservative climate of restoration in the Federal Republic. Be that as it may, his basic understanding of culture industry had not really changed.

3. See Helmut Lethen, *Neue Sachlichkeit 1924-1932: Studien zur Literatur des "Weissen Sozialismus"* (Stuttgart, 1970).

4. See Theodor W. Adorno, "Auf die Frage: Was ist deutsch?" and "Wissenschaftliche Erfahrungen in Amerika," *Stichworte: Kritische Modelle 2* (Frankfurt am Main, 1969), pp. 102-148.

5. Cf. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik*, p. 109.

Yet, there is a shift of emphasis in this essay which seems to indicate a more substantial rethinking of the dialectic of enlightenment. Adorno retracts, or at least mitigates, his earlier condemnation of enlightenment as an instrument of rationalized domination and oppression. To be sure, he still sees culture industry as a deception of the masses, but by describing the wholesale effect of culture industry as “substitute gratification” (*Ersatzbefriedigung*) and “anti-enlightenment” (*Anti-Aufklärung*), he seems to imply that genuine enlightenment and gratification of needs may be possible after all. At the end of the essay, Adorno reproaches culture industry for preventing the development of “autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves.” In the perspective of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the autonomous individual is irrevocably a phenomenon of the bourgeois past, while here—despite Adorno’s awareness of the pervasive role of exchange value in advanced capitalism—the autonomous individual is revived as a “precondition for a democratic society.” Any further explanation is lacking at this crucial juncture of the argument. And Adorno’s formulations indicate that he is falling back on a traditional “enlightened” solution that relies on humanistic education, rather than reutilizing the concept of enlightenment and relating it to contemporary collective experiences, to what Negt and Kluge describe as the proletarian public sphere.⁶ It seems ironic that Adorno relies again on the 18th-century bourgeois public sphere when the consequences of its demise had been so cogently analysed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and in the Frankfurt School’s first studies of authority, *Studien über Autorität und Familie*.

Today we must rethink the concept of culture industry and both analyze and activate the contradictions between a passive acceptance of cultural commodities and the possibility of an emancipatory cultural production. It makes little sense to suggest that Adorno’s condemnation of American civilization’s capitalist rationale reflects his “fear that a privileged road of escape” into the sanctuary of bourgeois culture was being cut off.⁷ Adorno’s analysis of culture industry is too precise and too firmly grounded in historical experience to be dismissed by such *ad hominem* attacks. Of course there are more substantial reasons to criticize Adorno. His condemnation of culture industry and administrated culture has to be understood as the correlate of his aesthetics of negativity. In 1960 he wrote in “Kultur und Verwaltung”

6. Cf. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Oeffentlichkeit und Erfahrung: Zur Organisationsanalyse bürgerlicher und proletarischer Oeffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1973); see also Eberhard Knödler-Bunte, “The Proletarian Public Sphere and Political Organization,” *New German Critique*, 4 (Winter 1975), 51-75.

7. Lethen, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, p. 27.

(Culture and Administration): "The authentic cultural object must retain and preserve whatever goes by the wayside in that process of increasing domination over nature which is reflected in expanding rationality and ever more rational forms of domination. Culture is the perennial protestation of the particular against the general, as long as the latter remains irreconcilable with the particular."⁸ This is precisely the major problem since reconciliation of the general and the particular is, according to Adorno, impossible, both in reality and in art. Therefore, he champions total negation, exemplified for him by Samuel Beckett's works. Here the negativity of Adorno's critique of society veers into an idealist aesthetic. Hans-Jürgen Krahl, one of his students, pertinently analyzed the inherent weakness of this position shortly after Adorno's death and before the publication of the posthumous *Aesthetische Theorie*: "Adorno's negation of late capitalist society has remained abstract, closing itself to the need for the specificity of the determinate negation, that dialectic category of the Hegel-Marx tradition to which Adorno had always been greatly indebted. In his last work, *Negative Dialectics*, historical materialism's concept of praxis is no longer questioned in terms of social change in its concrete historical forms, bourgeois forms of communication and proletarian forms of organization. The withering of the class struggle is mirrored in his critical theory as the atrophy of the materialist conception of history."⁹

Granted that the author of *Negative Dialectics* could have pointed to the objective situation in the Federal Republic (and the United States) before the mid-1960s to justify the thrust of his argument. But much of the radical critique of Adorno voiced during the student movement, the anti-war campaigns and the APO activities (extra-parliamentary opposition) was justified, and not only as an expression of subjective experience. As a critique of mere negativity, it is still valid today. On the other hand, Adorno's analysis of culture industry—at first widely acclaimed and then, after 1968, vehemently rejected—is an entirely different story. Today, when political and social reforms are being curtailed in the Federal Republic, when large-scale mergers in the news media and in publishing are commonplace,¹⁰ when political manipulation of the largely independent TV and radio stations is

8. Theodor W. Adorno, "Kultur und Verwaltung," *Soziologische Schriften I* (Frankfurt am Main, 1972), p. 128.

9. Hans-Jürgen Krahl, "The Political Contradictions in Adorno's Critical Theory," *Telos*, 21 (Fall 1974), 164-167. Originally written for *Frankfurter Rundschau* (August 13, 1969) and republished in Hans-Jürgen Krahl, *Konstitution und Klassenkampf* (Frankfurt am Main, 1971), pp. 285-288.

10. See Helmut H. Diederichs, *Konzentration in den Massenmedien: Systematischer Ueberblick zur Situation in der BRD* (Munich, 1973).

growing,¹¹ it is legitimate to ask whether Adorno's theses about culture industry should not command more attention than all those theories that rely on culture, especially mass culture, as a vehicle for revolutionary change. Since the relatively uncritical reception of Brecht and Benjamin in the late 1960s, it has become painfully evident that Brecht and Benjamin's theories were somewhat naive and certainly overoptimistic even in the early 1930s and more so during the period of emigration after 1933. It is quite absurd to project their theories without modification onto the present situation in the Federal Republic or the United States in the vain hope of a cultural revolution or a resurrection of class consciousness among the working class.

Adorno points precisely to this problem in "Culture Industry Reconsidered" where he picks up the concepts of technique and aura, both crucial to Brecht and Benjamin, and shows their problematic nature. Brecht and Benjamin believed that art would be revolutionized by technique and technology, and that this technical revolution, combined with the proletarianization of intellectuals, would bring about revolutionary collective modes of production and reception of art. Adorno, on the other hand, distinguishes between a technique grafted onto the art work by the culture industry (techniques of mechanical reproduction) and the technicality inherent in modern art itself. This distinction helps Adorno salvage the concept of technique while not having to abandon his belief in the genuine art work's claim to autonomy. Already in 1936 Adorno voiced his main objection to Benjamin's concepts as developed in the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In a letter of March 18, he wrote to Benjamin: "You underestimate the technicality of autonomous art and overestimate that of dependent art."¹² He criticized the lack of dialectics in Benjamin's analysis of the autonomous work of art while at the same time correctly accusing Benjamin of an "anarchistic romanticism of blind confidence in the spontaneous power of the proletariat in the historical process."¹³ It follows that Adorno also tries to refute Benjamin's thesis that the loss of aura is irrevocable and the prerequisite for revolutionary art.¹⁴ Adorno points out

11. A case in point are the CSU's recent attacks on the program management of the West German TV stations; cf. *Die Zeit*, 31 (August 1, 1975), American edition.

12. Theodor W. Adorno, "Letters to Walter Benjamin," *New Left Review*, 81 (Sept.-Oct. 1973), 67. In this issue of *New Left Review*, parts of the Adorno-Benjamin correspondence were made available in English. An introduction to the letters (pages 46-53) provides some necessary background information about the exchange, but it fails in not making any attempt to link the Benjamin-Adorno problematic to present-day debates and to show its political importance.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

14. For a critical discussion of Benjamin's notion of aura see Jürgen Habermas, "Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik—die Aktualität Walter Benjamins," *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt am Main, 1972); Michael Scharang, *Zur Emanzipation der Kunst*

that—contrary to Benjamin’s expectations—the loss of the aura of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction did not bring about collective reception, nor did it activate a mass public toward revolutionary change. He sees correctly that the culture industry itself has seized control of the decaying aura by conserving it as a “foggy mist”; a case in point would be the cult of stardom in the film industry and in the art world (Andy Warhol), which directly serves ideological and advertising interests; another example would be the “individualistic residues, sentimentality and an already rationally disposed and adapted romanticism,” which, according to Adorno characterize the culture industry. Benjamin himself discussed similar reservations in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”: “The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the ‘personality’ outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity.”¹⁵ But Benjamin’s position is different from Adorno’s in that he sees the manufacture of an illusory aura as a reaction to the actual shriveling of the aura. Adorno, on the other hand, ignores Benjamin’s materialist premise and replaces the “destruction of the aura” (*Zertrümmerung der Aura*, Benjamin)¹⁶ with a mere “crisis of the beautiful.”¹⁷ This crisis then still permits the continued production of high art, if only an art that is legitimized precisely by its awareness of the crisis. Thus Adorno maintains the notion of an “auratic art” which preserves the traditional aura as negativity.¹⁸

Adorno’s concept of art as negation has been rightfully criticized but at the same time often misunderstood. When Adorno claims autonomy for the work of art his position is radically different from the conservative and elitist *Kulturkritik* bent on salvaging traditional high culture and preserving the existing system of domination. Critics such as T.S. Eliot and philosophers such as Ortega y Gasset saw the masses as threatening all culture *from below*. Adorno’s insistence on autonomy, however, is the logical result of his analysis of mass culture as the intentional integration of its consumers *from above*. Adorno refers explicitly to changes in production and distribution. Though he rarely documents these changes in detail, one basic argument appears time and again: “Throughout the liberalist era, culture fell within the sphere of

(Neuwied, 1971), pp. 7-25; and Lienhard Wawrzyn, *Walter Benjamins Kunsttheorie: Kritik einer Rezeption* (Neuwied, 1973), esp. pp. 25-39.

15. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations* (New York, 1968), p. 233.

16. See Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 225.

17. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1973), p. 85.

18. Cf. Wawrzyn, *Kunsttheorie*, pp. 67-77.

circulation. Hence the gradual withering away of this sphere strikes culture to the quick. With the elimination of trade and its irrational loopholes by the calculated distributive apparatus of industry, the commercialization of culture culminates in absurdity.”¹⁹ This sphere of cultural circulation is the same bourgeois public sphere which was superficially restored in the Federal Republic after its total dissolution by fascism. In the 1950s, many authors and artists believed it to be basically intact. Important debates about the ‘engagement’ of art in the wake of Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (1948) took place within this context. Then the student movement of the 1960s exposed the illusory nature of this cultural sphere with the use of Critical Theory and efforts were made to redefine culture and its function in society. Since then, however, nothing much has changed in the way culture industry operates. Reforms in education and in cultural production (unionization of artists and writers, participation in editorial and managerial decisions by newspaper and broadcasting employees, introduction of collective work in the theaters) appear to have reached an impasse. The liberal climate which favored this reforming impetus has long since been dissipated, most notably under the pressures of the economic recession. This situation lends renewed relevance to Adorno’s concept of a manipulated culture industry, not, of course, to the totally negative version presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but rather to the modified one in “Culture Industry Reconsidered.” This essay provides parameters for future investigations which should make use of Adorno’s essential insights: the shrinking of the sphere of circulation of the era of liberalism, the standardization and administration of culture, the reification and commodity nature of aesthetic products, the predominance of exchange value and its impact on culture, the denial and suppression of human sensuality and spontaneity. Further work needs to be done in applying these concepts to current aspects and products of the culture industry. Only to deplore the reification of everyday life and the commodity character of all cultural products leads to abstract and moralizing critiques which are particularly futile when based on the assumption that an organized party elite must be called upon to produce enlightenment and force a transformation of the mode of production and that changes in the mode of production of mass culture will necessarily change the mode of communication.²⁰

Shortly before his death Adorno retracted his thesis of the total commercialization and manipulation of culture. In a radio lecture about

19. Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” *Prisms* (London, 1967), p. 25.

20. Cf. Dieter Prokop, *Massenkultur und Spontaneität: Zur veränderten Warenform der Massenkommunikation im Spätkapitalismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1974), p. 29.

leisure time and culture industry he expressed doubts as to whether “the equation of culture industry and consumer consciousness can indeed be upheld,”²¹ and spoke of symptoms of a double consciousness. An empirical study of public reaction to the wedding of Dutch Princess Beatrix and German diplomat Claus von Amsberg—an event given tremendous coverage in the German mass media—had shown that the public did not attribute as much importance to the event as theorists of total manipulation might have assumed. Adorno noted: “There was evidence that many people were surprisingly realistic and were able to evaluate critically the political and social importance of this ‘unique’ event which they had witnessed breathlessly on TV a short time before.”²² And he concluded tentatively: “It seems that the integration of consciousness and leisure time is not yet complete after all. The real interests of individuals are still strong enough to resist total manipulation up to a point. This analysis would be in tune with the prognosis that consciousness cannot be totally integrated in a society in which the basic contradictions remain undiminished.”²³ It is precisely from this point that one must probe into the concrete phenomena of mass culture. The term culture industry, which by now has become a base coin of American mass communications research,²⁴ must be restored its original polemical thrust. If a critique of present-day mass culture is to have any practical effect it must recognize the public’s needs as legitimate and at all costs must avoid the automatic denunciation of desires for fun and entertainment, for action stories and romantic novels, for sport shows, horror movies and catastrophe “spectaculars.” Keeping in mind Wilhelm Reich’s analysis of the duality of conformist and emancipatory moments in the psyche of the mass audience, we must resist one-dimensionality as well as orthodox and puritan moralizing. The cultural behavior of specific social groups must be analyzed within the framework of organizational analyses that take into account the changing conditions of production and reception of mass culture today. An empirical and historical understanding of all aspects of culture industry is still lacking and detailed studies and monographs are necessary to its development.²⁵ By making Adorno’s “Culture Industry Reconsidered” available in English, *NGC* intends to stimulate further investigation that will draw on debates about bourgeois and proletarian public sphere, popular and high art, media

21. Theodor W. Adorno, “Freizeit,” *Stichworte*, p. 65.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 66 f.

24. Cf. Paul M. Hirsch, “Processing Fads and Fashions: An Organizational Set-Analysis of Cultural Industry Systems,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 77 (1972), 639-659.

25. Cf. Peter Uwe Hohendahl’s forthcoming essay to be published in the next issue of *NGC*.

concentration, mass communication and mass psychology. While Adorno's insights are based on historical experiences that are only partially related to ours, these insights can be applied to the culture industry of the 1970s—if we stay this side of the thesis of universal manipulation and delusion (*Verblendungszusammenhang*), while going beyond the thesis of absolute negativity of all contemporary art.

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