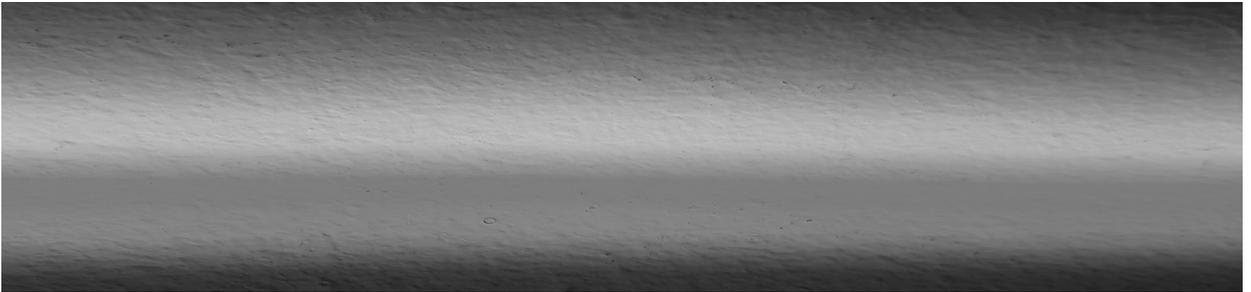


PART V

Culture and Aesthetics



The Culture Industry

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of the culture industry as it is presented in the chapter with the same title in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is the most famous and most widely received and discussed concept in the entire tradition of critical theory and the Frankfurt School. The main reason for the attention that Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry received and still receives can be seen in the authors' strategy to push the concept of ideology, as it can be found in the early Marx, further into the twentieth century. They do this in order to allow readers to extend the critique of ideology to a wider spectrum of cultural, artistic, and entertainment phenomena. In addition, in its uncanny mix of psycho-social and social analysis of consumer entertainment, the book is one of the most important texts written by philosophers that analyses, within broader speculations about history and progress, the wide-ranging consequences of media

practices, such as film, radio, and television, for a mass society and mass audience. Moreover, its beautiful but sharp formulations, as well as its cool and surgical precision expressed in an aphoristic style, makes the text one of the most fascinating documents of the entire history of the Frankfurt School, if not of the entire twentieth century tradition in (European) critical theory. The concept of the 'culture industry' is the magnifying glass of critical theory, and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is its telescope.

The chapter, which in later essays Adorno slightly revised and reformulated, was written at a point in time when Europe faced its darkest horrors and when the main drivers of the enlightenment, such as science, technology, and rationality, turned into the most destructive means of an entire epoch. In addition, the fascist takeover of major areas of the world indicated, as Benjamin has it, the worse failures of the left, most visible in the failure of revolutionary attempts in Europe since the second half of the nineteenth century, which

ended with Hitler in 1933. Finally, new forms of artistic practices, such as photography, film, and radio, turned out to be useful as nasty and murderous tools for fascist propaganda, for the hypnosis of the masses, and for the distribution of the most destructive, anti-Semitic, racist, and genocidal positions created by an authoritarian politics that the world had never seen before. Although this historical context is crucial for getting a sense of the cold distance from which the analyses within the book, which was written during their exile in the United States, are presented by its authors, we would do well to not read the analysis of the culture industry as something that belongs to the past. This is due to the fact that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* emerged in a world that, on the one hand, is still with us, namely, as state and monopoly capitalism, and, on the other hand, returns on the political scene every day somewhere on this globe, namely, as a threatening arrival of authoritarian politics and its accompanying authoritarian population. The reader is asked to understand the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a message in a bottle [*Flaschenpost*] that is addressed to readers who will one day pick up the book and understand that *they* are implicated by what is written in the book, i.e., that the book is written *for us*.

The reception of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* has had ups and downs since 1947, and it is safe to say that the nature of the reception always depends upon its socio-cultural context. Most standard critiques of the book and its subsection on the culture industry are written from either a post-modern point of view that is bothered by the authors' preference for 'high art', or from the viewpoint of a positivist worldview that can no longer digest philosophical thought, i.e., any thinking without a direct outcome and follow-up assessment. Accordingly, the main charges against Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry are the following: (1) it is elitist¹, (2) it underestimates the role of the media for democratic education as well as the force of bourgeois

ideals², (3) it remains entirely negative³, and (4) it defeats itself because of its performative-contradictory claims based on a critique of reason while using reason.⁴ More serious charges are (5) that Adorno and Horkheimer are Eurocentric⁵, (6) that they rely on a concept of history that is obsolete, and (7) that their thinking cannot escape its historical context and belongs to the past. It comes as no surprise, then, that the main *positive* reception of the concept of culture industry focuses both on the important role of mass entertainment and consumer society from the perspective of the communicative and cultural sciences, as well as on the role of the media for consumption and psychology. As such, at least in most cases, this work sets aside the larger background of Adorno's and Horkheimer's writings on the culture industry, such as the Marxist tradition, the analysis of fascist societies and the fascist state, the role of anti-semitism for capitalist societies, and the connection between the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, which he wrote at the same time. Given that much of contemporary critical theory, at least as it is represented in the work of Fraser, Benhabib, Habermas, and Honneth, has given up on the Marxist background of critical theory and in general assumes that we have reached a satisfactory level of democracy in the post-war world, this dismissal should not be surprising. Moreover, mistreatments of core elements of Adorno's and Horkheimer's critical theory are found in main commentaries on Adorno's philosophy and social theory. For example, in the *Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Huhn, 2004), though it is presented as an authoritative source on Adorno and as a major scholarly companion to Adorno, almost the entire volume dismisses central aspects of Adorno's critical philosophy, such as his class-based concept of society and his lifelong faith in political economy. And while some of the contributors to the Adorno companion mention Marx here and there, in general, they dismiss Adorno's Marxian background and instead deal with Weber and Freud.

Moreover, in distinction to Horkheimer and contemporary critical theorists such as Habermas and Honneth, Adorno never gave up on basic principles of Marx's *Critique of Political Economy*, including the conception of dialectics as outlined in Marx's *Grundrisse*, the concept of social totality, and, mediated by Sohn-Rethel, the principle of exchange and 'real abstraction' that occurs within exchange (Sohn-Rethel, 1978). Rather than understanding society as a sphere of discourses, systems, or layers, Adorno held fast to a concept of capitalist social reality understood as the 'totality of the exchange society'. Accordingly, in this discussion I will develop a re-reading of the culture industry chapter in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as well as reflect on the topics of culture and industry in general through the lens of a broader critical theory of society. Against the reductions of the 'culturalist' understandings of the culture industry, I submit that we should reconnect the concept of culture to the concept of society, to the concept of political economy, as well as to the concept of capital. According to my re-reading, the real 'hinge' that holds these concepts and the culture industry together is Adorno's and Horkheimer's attempt to develop a materialist theory of subjectivity in the culture industry chapter by way of turning Kant's concept of schematism into a social-material concept. What Kant presents in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a 'mechanism' of reason and the pure imagination to synthesize intuitions with a priori concepts becomes in Adorno and Horkheimer the formulation of the culture industry as a mechanism of (capitalist) society to synthesize and pre-structure social experience with prefabricated ideas. Accordingly, the culture industry is not only a social-material concept, but it is understood by Adorno as the *principle for establishing the unity of society*. The latter aspect is important, especially as this goes along with Adorno's interpretation of the transcendental logic in his lectures after WWII (which are usually not read by readers of Adorno who do not have a philosophical background).

Here, schematization of objecthood does not occur in the mind of the subject; rather, it occurs in social reality and is *produced by the capitalist form of consciousness production*. Beside the fact that it comes closer to a genuine philosophical understanding of the chapter, reading the culture industry chapter from this point of view has the following advantages for a contemporary reading of Adorno and Horkheimer's ideas: (1) it reconnects their work with contemporary analyses of abstraction through the digital world, the electronic and brain industries, and new forms of labor; (2) it offers a counter position to the many, pervading positions found in the wide sense of what is often called 'critical theory', i.e., theorists and philosophers who work in the tradition from Deleuze to Butler; (3) it makes the analyses in Adorno and Horkheimer philosophical again; and (4) it moves Adorno's philosophy closer to a contemporary form of Marxism and Marxist analysis of contemporary capitalism, thereby moving away from the 'official' positions offered in contemporary critical theory, from Habermas to Allen.

REDISCOVERING THE THEORY BEHIND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

The Culture Industry and Social Totality

'Kultur' in the German tradition differs from its juxtaposition with civilization, which is how the term is used in the Anglo-American tradition. Culture in the German tradition has a wider and deeper meaning for the understanding of individuals and their flourishing *as* individuals and as *cultivated* individuals. While one line of thinking about culture goes back to the humanist tradition, the other line of thinking about culture goes back to the German tradition in aesthetics and its successor in romanticism.⁶

As to the humanist tradition, though this might seem to be remote, we should not

mistake that the humanist tradition and its focus on 'culture' goes back to Ancient and, in particular, Roman thought, which made its way through the German upper high school system, and until recently remained an important element of what it meant to be an 'educated' and 'cultured' person. For example, culture is used in close connection with philosophy, which is defined as 'cultura animi' [cultivation of the soul] and it has an agricultural sense of 'cultivation'. Culture or cultivation refers to the process of helping something to bring out its utmost essence and telos. A plant can only grow and flourish, and thereby become *free*, if it is held in its own possibilities and if it can develop that which lies in it as a definite possibility. Similarly, an individual can only *become* an individual and in this sense free herself *towards* herself when she grows up in an environment that nourishes and cultivates her own inward possibilities.⁷ Though Adorno and Horkheimer do not explicitly speak about culture in this sense, and though they would have distanced themselves from any teleological and quasi-biological determinism (which most prominently is featured in Spengler), they indicate through the object of their critique, namely, the culture *industry*, that true culture and true *Bildung* [character formation] can make one free. Accordingly, culture is not simply a process of suppression, as, for example, in Freud. Indeed, a wider and less conservative meaning of 'Kultur' can be reached if we more broadly understand artistic, creative, and aesthetic activities as truth-oriented (and therefore no longer teleologically determined), which enters the picture through the German tradition in aesthetics as a discipline that, negating the orientation towards the sciences, is related to reason, freedom, and education. Culture, in this tradition, is related to autonomy.

According to this romanticist and aesthetic tradition that Adorno and Horkheimer embrace, culture has a threefold structure of being based on autonomy, spontaneity, and criticism (negative distance), which has its

roots in the idea that aesthetics is an autonomous actualization of reason and judgment.⁸ As this tradition has it, aesthetic reason and the aesthetic realm are the *true* realms of human freedom, insofar as – at least if we take Kant for a moment as an authority in this – in theoretical judgments as well as in moral judgments human reason is not really free and autonomous, insofar as reason in these areas of human reality is *bound* by the object and bound to objective truth. However, as Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and the entire romantic aesthetics that followed Schiller holds, aesthetics, art, and creative practices are the 'realm' in which human judgment, reasoning, reflection, and critical engagement can come to a full realization of its own possibilities. Put differently, creativity and the arts are the only way in which humans can really *become* free, spontaneous, and autonomous.⁹ Given this, it is immediately clear why Adorno made several attempts to contrast culture with administration rather than with civilization (CI: 123; GS 8: 122). Moreover, it also should be clear why, for Adorno and Horkheimer, true artistic practice is *opposed to capital* and how culture is turned into an industry, since the effect of the industrialization as well as the administered culture is *precisely* to void spontaneity, autonomy, and criticism. Within the culture industry, 'pseudoindividuality reigns' (DoE: 125; GS 3: 177). Sadly, this social structure no longer allows the individual to use her productive imagination and creative capacities independent from the objective world; it no longer allows the individual to 'play' with the world, to lay down her highest ideas in art, to become a flourishing individual, and it no longer permits critical distance from the world as a whole. As a consequence, the total integration of individuals heightens, true future oriented and distanced thinking disappears, and aesthetic reason is diminished, if not destroyed. What is left is a cruel, cold, and brutalizing form of morality as well as an all evasive science that, under its technological veil, fixates and defines what *can* be known.

Society as a given fact ‘absorbs the truth content’ (CI: 65; GS 3: 303), and appropriated by the positivist (social) sciences, turns into something that has no future and remains what it is forever: ‘Imagination is replaced by a mechanically relentless control mechanism which determines whether the latest imago to the distributed really represents an exact, accurate and reliable reflection of the relevant item of reality’ (CI: 64; GS 3: 301). Without the free appropriation of new rules and without the critical distance of judgments, society becomes a naturalized and reified thing that appears as something external to social individuals. The culture industry, as Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s argument can be read, affirms this increasing naturalization.

A third sense of ‘culture’, in addition to the humanist and aesthetic sense of the term, that Adorno and Horkheimer implicitly have in mind comes into play through twentieth-century philosophy and social theory, particularly through the thought of Simmel and Lukács, and suggests that we read the culture industry chapter through the lens of a theory of capitalist reproduction. According to Lukács’s early work, which in turn was influenced by Simmel and Neo-Kantian philosophies, and which was read by all members of the early Frankfurt School, ‘culture’ can be interpreted through an expanded version of Marx’s concept of commodity and commodification. Lukács tried to extend the concept of commodity, and what he saw as its being limited in Marx to the products of labor, by arguing that, once we understand commodity relations as constituted by a larger horizon of meaning, commodification can also be understood as reification, which can then be extended to all kinds of social phenomena, such as the arts, language, law, love, and politics.¹⁰ Reification, he argued, extends Marx’s basic ideas beyond the realm of production to include the entirety of social activities and products, i.e., culture. This shift is important for two main reasons: (1) it expands the reach of Marxism and Marxist philosophy beyond the narrow realm of labor and production, and

(2) it can more properly argue that ‘culture’ is not simply an echo or the superstructure above an economic base, but, instead, is a substantial part of the reproduction of the entire system. Culture, in this sense, becomes central for a critical theory that tries to grasp social reality through the lens of political economy. Though Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s analysis nicely shows how a specific ideological and psychic structure (for example, desires) are produced as empty wishes by the culture industry, they rarely trace this structure back to the fact that it depends upon the structure of production by media corporations and the structure of distribution and consumption (for this, see Wayne, 2003: 61–86). Adorno and Horkheimer primarily focus on the products themselves.¹¹

Seen from this perspective, culture is not simply an arena for beliefs, for mental structures, for ideas, or for the construction of body knowledge about society itself; rather, it becomes functional for the reproduction of the *system itself* as a sort of ‘super-ideology’ that produces and structures thought in a way that is uncritical, equalized, standardized, and unified. Accordingly, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry is not simply the arena for false beliefs or the formation of a belief system that leads to cognitive distortions, implicit biases, or other forms of cognitive mismatch with reality; instead, the culture industry becomes one, if not *the*, main dimension of society through which capitalist society reproduces itself. Knowledge is here not seen as something external to society or, as a poor reading of Marx has it, as ‘superstructure’; rather, knowledge of society and its subjectivity is itself part of its reproduction. This conclusion is very important for understanding the concept of the culture industry, especially given that the majority of the literature still interprets the culture industry as a construction of the knowledge of societal members towards the external reality; the point, however, is to understand the culture industry as a *self*-relation through which societal members gain knowledge of themselves as *societal* members.¹²

The Culture Industry as Social Schematism

The philosophical dimension of Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry within the horizon of a theory of capitalist social reproduction is closely linked to the self-relation of this society to itself and the self-knowledge that it produces for its own operations. In a central passage that is not often read because it is not contained in the chapter on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the authors write the following:

The true nature of the schematism which externally coordinates the universal and the particular, the concept and the individual, case, finally turns out, in current science, to be the interest of industrial society. Being is apprehended in terms of manipulation and administration. Everything including the individual human being, not to mention the animal, becomes a repeatable, replaceable process, a mere example of the conceptual models of the system. Conflict between administrative, reifying science, between the public mind and the experience of the individual, is precluded by the prevailing circumstances. The senses are determined by the conceptual apparatus in advance of perception; the citizen sees the world as made a priori of the stuff from which he himself constructs it. Kant intuitively anticipated what Hollywood has consciously put into practice: images are precensored during production by the same standard of understanding which will later determine their reception by viewers. (DoE: 65; GS 3: 102)

Here, the authors put to work one of the most important concepts in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in their analysis of the culture industry and mass entertainment. In Kant's *Critique*, 'schematism' is a mechanism that – independent from the empirical appropriation of the world – makes it possible for the human mind to have a 'stable' and given reality at all. According to Kant, and summarized in a very reductive way, the productive imagination produces a pure synthesis of pure intuitions and the rational categories needed to have a reality at all. Since the categories are at the same time the conditions for the intelligibility of *objects as objects*,

i.e., as objects *for* reason, the schematism allows reason to 'project' in advance a structured world *in which* or *through which* all concrete experiences are possible. In another passage, the authors write:

According to Kant, the homogeneity of the general and the particular is guaranteed by the 'schematism of pure understanding', by which he means the unconscious activity of the intellectual mechanism which structures perception in accordance with the understanding. The intelligibility which subjective judgment discovers in any matter is imprinted on that matter by the intellect as an objective quality *before it enters the ego*. Without such a schematism, in short, without the intellectual element in perception, no impression would conform to the corresponding concept, no category to the particular example; thought, not to speak of the system towards which everything is directed, *would be devoid of unity*. (DoE: 64; GS 3: 100; italics, C.L.)

In this passage I highlighted that the schematism itself functions as an 'unconscious' mechanism in the soul before the ego and its rationality can get hold of it. Two things are important in this regard: (1) even if, out of context, this passage reads like a Freudian translation of the epistemological concept found in Kant, a further careful reading reveals that Adorno and Horkheimer reframe the concept of schematism by giving it a social-material meaning; (2) Adorno and Horkheimer stress the fact that in Kant, schematism is important for establishing the *unity* of the knowledge of reality, and, since in Kant the conditions for the possibility of *knowledge* of things are at the same time the conditions for the possibility of the knowledge of *things*, the unity that they have in mind is the *social-material* unity of society *in its self-knowledge*. The social-material transition that Adorno and Horkheimer prepare here, the idea for which they received from Sohn-Rethel's theory of social abstraction (Sohn-Rethel, 1978), is based on the claim that the culture industry is the real-existing social-material schema that establishes the framework of social knowledge *as such*. 'Knowledge as such' refers here to

knowledge that this society – *as a specifically capitalist society* – can generate under these conditions, and to the possibility of knowing itself *as* such a society in its unity. The culture industry, accordingly, stands for the knowledge that capitalist society needs to have of itself in order to allow for all concrete activities that fall under it. Moreover, with respect to individuals it establishes a pre-perceptive frame in which the world as a whole is projected in advance, which ‘censors’ in advance what can be experienced *in* this world. The culture industry establishes a socially a priori harmony between production and consumption. Put in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s words:

Even during their leisure time, consumers must orient themselves according to the unity of production. The active contribution which Kantian schematism still expected of subjects – that they should, from the first, relate sensuous multiplicity to fundamental concepts – is denied to the subject by industry. It purveys schematism as its first service to the customer. According to Kantian schematism, a secret mechanism within the psyche preformed immediate data to fit them into the system of pure reason. That secret has now been unraveled. (DoE: 98; GS 3: 145)

It is interesting to note that the ‘dreamless art for the people’ (DoE: 98) comes close to a surprising formulation that Marx uses in regard to capital fetishism in his preparatory manuscripts for *Capital*, written between 1861 and 1863. Marx describes the commodity fetishism, which he analyses in this manuscript as interest and capital fetishism, in an astonishing formula, as ‘fiction without fantasy’ (Marx, 1979: 1450).¹³ What this means is that in its schematization of what can be meaningfully experienced under capitalism, the culture industry functions in the same fashion as commodity fetishism in Marx, insofar as commodity fetishism is not a subjective form of knowledge or belief; rather, it is the objective and, hence, unconscious praxis tied to the entire exchange and production praxis of valorized labor and commodities. Indeed, fetishism is an ‘objective

fiction’ for which subjective engagement is no longer needed. Similarly, the culture industry is the projection of societal self-knowledge for which experience – as something that escapes the culture industry – is no longer meaningful.

The Main Characteristics of the Culture Industry

The culture industry as a societal schematism that projects forward a frame for the unity of experience and understanding, ahead of all concrete activity, is characterized by a few noteworthy concepts of social understanding, which are implicitly opposed to ‘true’ culture as something that is based on *uniqueness, non-instrumentality, autonomy, imagination, exceptionality, happiness, transcendence, utopian impulses, needs, beauty, and complexity*. In contrast, the culture industry prefigures sociality as something that is based on *sameness, repeatability, instrumentality, affirmation, empty wishes, and simplicity*.¹⁴ The most important social concept under which everything becomes possible in a capitalist society is *sameness*:

The schematic nature of this procedure is evident from the fact that the mechanically differentiated products are ultimately all the same. That the difference between the models of Chrysler and General Motors is fundamentally illusory is known by any child, who is fascinated by that very difference. (DoE: 97; GS 3: 144)

Sameness is important because it allows us to see more easily the connection to the question of exchange and the real abstraction that is a part of its form. Among many other things, one aspect that is crucial for the viability of the value form in Marx’s *Capital* is that value be based on an abstraction that establishes a universal *exchangeability* of everything with everything. As the authors put it, ‘[w]hatever might be different is made the same. [...] The identity of everything with everything is bought at the cost that

nothing can at the same time be identical to itself' (DoE: 8; GS 3: 28). The quantitative equation that makes commodities exchangeable requires a qualitative dimension that *makes it possible* for commodities to be equated with each other, which, in turn, permits them to be exchanged. Although we do not need to go into all the details of abstraction, wherein abstract labor and value become the universal form that all activities under capitalist conditions take on in reality, it is important to note that Adorno and Horkheimer do not simply operate with an empty opposition of sameness and difference as the speculative structure of modernity (à la Heidegger); instead, as the quotation above shows, Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the framework of sameness from which the culture industry as self-knowledge of capitalist society is derived includes both how it constitutes the identity of products as well as the meaningful horizon for consumption, necessary for capitalist production insofar as autonomous and spontaneous products no longer 'fit' in a valorized world.

The connection between epistemology and social theory as social ontology is also very clearly indicated in other central writings of Adorno: for example, for Adorno, nonidentity is the key concept for what it means to know something *and* the core of social theory as a theory of social reality. Qualitatively different use values are rendered equivalent through a third moment or mediating relation, namely, abstract human labor. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes, 'the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification' (Adorno, 1973: 146). Identity thinking and its accompanying epistemology, hence, are not simply a problem for social theorists and earlier philosophy; rather, it constitutes the *reality* of capitalist social organization. Social epistemology is not only a reconstruction of what and how something like (capitalist) society can be known in and as theory, but it is also constituted *within* society, allowing the basic

concepts of such a theory to function as ontological guiding clues for understanding social *reality*. The critique of identity thinking is therefore *identical with* the analysis and the critique of existing society. Overcoming identity thinking, consequently, is not only a theoretical or academic task, it is at the same time a *political* task. To think from the standpoint of redemption means that we philosophize from the standpoint of a world in which capital is no longer the all-encompassing principle of social structuration. Put differently, the exchange principle is *both* a category that constitutes social knowledge *and* a category that constitutes social reality.¹⁵

In a similar fashion, the main features that Adorno and Horkheimer attribute to the schema of an industrialized culture are *precisely* those that also characterize the value form and, consequently, capital. Speculatively put, the culture industry is the means through which value is known in the everyday life of individuals socialized in modern societies. Accordingly, we misunderstand the thesis about the sameness of the products of the culture industry if we think of the sameness as one of content; on the contrary, the sameness is an argument about the *form* of cultural products.¹⁶

The question of sameness has more recently been explored in relation to celebrity culture and the role of fame both for cultural products and for commodities as brands. For example, Taylor and Harris write (2008: 135):

Adorno argued that the culture industry relies upon an unhealthy denial of the marginal nature of the supposed differences between what are essentially the same commodities. The illusion of difference is created by the advertising industry's manufacture of superficial distinctions and purported attributes. This aspect of the culture industry's output is equally true in relation to celebrities and brands. Successfully advertised goods mean that inanimate objects become celebrity products.

The authors illustrate their thesis with reference to tv reality shows and music shows such as *American Idol* or *The Apprentice* (whose starring role, not by chance, was

played by the current US president, Donald Trump, bringing together the branding of himself as a celebrity commodity and fame-power). In these and other examples, celebrity and commodity form are tied together by fame and by what the authors call 'abstract desire' (Taylor and Harris 2008: 138) and the 'politics of banality' (149). The audience is included in 'banality tv' (154) as a participating consumer, and the 'judges' sell the musical products and songs as representatives of the music industry. Moreover, as the authors underline, celebrity culture is closely connected to personality-based politics as spectacle: 'both celebrity culture and the closely related personality-based politics, share the exposure of people's private lives as a distraction from more substantive structural issues – political, social and economic questions – emotional affect replaces political effect' (154).¹⁷

Closely connected to the category of sameness is the concept of *repeatability*, which, though it follows from the abstract sameness of all things that characterize the products of the culture industry, also differs in one important respect, namely, that its sameness is based on the prevention of *newness* that is already inherent in the value form. '[T]he leveling rule of abstraction', as the authors have it, 'makes everything in nature repeatable' (DoE: 9; GS 3: 29). Products of the culture industry cannot fall outside of the schema, need to be repeatable in principle, and therefore cannot reach real autonomy and spontaneity: 'What is new, however, is that the irreconcilable elements of the concepts of culture, art, and amusement, have been subjected equally to the concept of purpose. [...] Its element is repetition' (DoE: 108; GS 3: 157).

From repeatability and *purpose* we can directly derive the concept of *instrumentality*. The culture industry does not permit a meaningful world in which things are produced, or activities are undertaken, for their inner qualities alone; instead, cultural consumption products are received in accordance with a horizon of assessment through

which everything needs to be 'good for something else' and must be useful for the sake of the overall context of production and capital. Instrumentality should be seen here in close proximity with political economy, insofar as under the universal condition of valorized labor and valorized life everything that humans produce and create has, in the end, only one 'use', namely, to function as a use value for the growth of wealth, i.e., for the self-referential increase of capital and growth of a society that is caught in its mechanisms. As one commentator puts it, '[c]ulture is made specifically for the purpose of being sold; production is subordinated to distribution and the promise of art is thereby dissolved' (Gunster, 2000: 48). As a consequence, everything becomes subjected to the value form, and the culture industry presents us with the knowledge of the value form, and of capital in the form of culture and cultural consumption.

The true function of all cultural products for the commodity and value form and its inherent abstraction, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, is to empty out all wishes and desires that might still be contained in a perverted form in the production of cultural products. 'The culture industry does not sublimate, it suppresses' (DoE: 111; GS 3: 161). Having abstract wishes and desires, however, entails that desires, which under different circumstances would transcend the given reality towards happiness, satisfaction and the fulfillment of needs, become subjected to an empty form (which can then be filled with *any* commodity, or can *repeatedly* be filled with the same commodity). Happiness becomes reduced to the repetition of the same. For Adorno and Horkheimer, canned laughter, enforced fun, and the general gag culture are the best examples of empty repetitions. Laughter becomes the 'instrument for cheating happiness' (DoE: 112; GS 3: 162), nothing is taken seriously anymore, and pseudo-individuality and pseudo-authenticity reign. As the authors state, '[t]he culture industry endlessly cheats its consumer out of what it endlessly promises.

The promissory note of pleasure issued by plot and packaging is indefinitely prolonged' (DoE: 111; GS 3: 161).¹⁸

As a consequence, society is treated by the culture industry as a given and as a fact. Capitalism is carved in stone. The commodity culture frames all meaning for creative and artistic praxis. The culture industry opens up the same positivistic paradigm as the modern sciences, insofar as everything becomes turned into nature and information. Transcendence, once centered in art and theory, withers away. Everything is what it is. $A=A$ is the law of value, now made known to every consumer. Products of the culture industry 'are nothing but what they are' (CI: 89; GS 3: 329).

In sum, the ultimate horizon that the culture industry establishes is the socially existing knowledge that belongs to value and the commodity form as existing social relations in their abstract reality. It produces the subjective knowledge of what, objectively, belongs to the value and commodity form. The abstraction that the culture industry carries forward is the commodity fetishism elevated to a general and universal knowledge of this society in its really existing social form.

EXTENSIONS: CULTURE INDUSTRY AS LIFE INDUSTRY

Adorno's and Horkheimer's treatment of the culture industry is still based on what we might call a 'remainder of subjectivism' in their analysis, if we mean by 'subjectivism' remnants of the idealist philosophy of subjectivity. For example, they still speak of the culture industry as a 'filter' (DoE: 99; GS 3: 147) between the consumer and the world, which, in the context of new forms of production and consumption that we have seen emerging in recent decades, should be modified.¹⁹ Put differently, they assume that there is a subjective 'psychic realm' between intellect and reality. Recent developments have

witnessed the attempt by industries to connect to the mind (electronics, networks), or to life (bio) and the brain (neuro), in order to *directly produce* the mind and brain required for the reproduction of capitalist society. The goal is to make the entirety of life adaptable to the demands of growth and capital, whereby the neurosciences and bio-engineering in connection with the electronic industries are pushing the culture industry onto new levels including human organs, our DNA, and the brain.²⁰ Through new developments in the brain and life sciences, we are now at a point where the culture industry that Adorno and Horkheimer had in mind (film, radio, tv, advertisement, etc.) becomes less important given that the industries that deal with the entire range of human mental activities and capacities are about to modify these activities and capacities through direct technological modifications and production. These technologies include screens, electronic devices, GPS systems, algorithms, chips, self-ordering refrigerators, and Google-powered glasses. Through these network technologies, a global system of devices and a global internet of things has been established. 'Technologies of the soul' (Stiegler, 2014: 12) and 'programming industries' (Stiegler, 2011: 113) replace the traditional media industries (although they still have the same function) and lead to a '*becoming-commodity of consciousness*' (Stiegler, 2011: 63). The schematism, we might say, becomes implanted where Kant had already located it, namely, *in* the human body and within the human mind. Human organs are powered by technologies that are interconnected through networks, deliver data to digital industries, and make predictions on their own. New 'cultural' products are video games, portable televisions, 3D virtual-reality devices, phone apps, and tracking devices that will be implanted in the body, or developments in the neurosciences that make products marketable by directly controlling consumers. For example, neuroscientific research is used for developing

stimulating systems that can direct consumers' desires without their knowledge. Since these new digital systems keep track of virtually everything, and since they do not forget, they become more knowledgeable than their users. For example, a phone app knows more about the user than the user does about herself. Cultural products in digital and network form can be infinitely modified and placed virtually everywhere; in other words, the *entire* time span and the entire spatial world of individuals can now be occupied by these new cultural products. Again, this scenario goes beyond what Adorno and Horkheimer envisaged, insofar as it will at some point eliminate subjectivity altogether. Consumers' desires will be controlled through 'injections' in the body.

A foreshadow can be seen in the fact that screens are virtually *everywhere* and *always* with us; and behind the surface everything can be traced back to the interest of capital (Stiegler, 2011: 7). Similarly, Jonathan Beller has argued that the products of the culture industry 'are today imbricated in perception itself' (Beller, 2006: 1), which is the effect of the further development of the internet as an all pervasive network of cultural production for the sake of value. As a consequence, the human senses are *produced* and reorganized by new technologies of vision and attention building via the 'incorporation of bodies by capital' (Beller, 2006: 13; for more on this point, also see McLuhan, 1994). What began in the nineteenth century as the 'revolutionizing of the means of perception' (Crary, 2001: 13) has expanded to include digital production. Google is the new Hollywood. Seen from this point of view, film theaters, looked at by Adorno with suspicion because of their mass character, seem to be a romantic thing of the past.

Following Adorno and Horkheimer, Stiegler argues that it is 'libidinal energy itself that tends to be destroyed – that energy of which the objects, which are *those of belief*, are now systematically submitted to calculation in every sphere' (Stiegler, 2013: 65).

This sphere, as mentioned above, goes *beyond* the mental sphere. What is experienced as need, however, is now controlled by mental industries, especially since any desire for something outside of consumption has been taken over by a system of need production. It is no longer simply the case that media technologies take over language (through writing, books, machines, computerization, media, standardizations, etc.); they now take over the whole psychic and sensual apparatus of humans: vision, auditory systems, touch, pain, etc. The whole range of the *noein*, in other words, is in the process of being *produced* by these industries. Consequently, what Adorno and Horkheimer fail to see is that the thesis about the schematization of social objects needs to be supported by a theory of social reproduction and the production of subjectivity required for this reproduction. Towards this end, Stiegler has worked out some aspects of what he calls the 'industrialization of memory' through which subjectivities are produced *before* memory can be externalized (for this, see Stiegler, 2010). Memory, i.e., the access that subjects can gain to themselves and their past, can increasingly *only* be exercised through devices, databases, networks, information technology, etc. Put simply, the (network of) devices always already knows more than the individual. Although libraries also 'know' more than their users, they cannot influence the behavior of individuals in a direct manner. In the case of electronic industries, the individual and the knowledge of her preferences, history, biography, past choices, etc. are connected to each other through the new 'media'. The face-recognition camera in the store will make 'choices' for me and control my desires without me knowing it; my phone, knowing my 'preferences', will guide me to a specific painting in the *Chicago Art Institute*. The problem is not, as Plato once bemoaned, that we forget through externalization; rather, our knowledge is *already* externalized before it confronts the subject. 'Manipulation' of

desires and wishes no longer needs the psyche. The content of our desires can now be created directly. This is a new dimension of industrialized culture; it allows the industries and their fully subsumed sciences to short circuit the ‘cultural’ products that Adorno and Horkheimer had in mind. The identity logic of the culture industry can now directly be produced with screens that function on the level of the brain, i.e., as external mind devices. Similarly, the identity logic of value that Adorno and Horkheimer see operating in the logic of industrialized culture now becomes a ‘global mnemotechnical system’ (Stiegler, 2011: 8) that connects (in principle) every *thing* with every other thing on earth. Global consumption time is now addressed as ‘brain time’ (Stiegler, 2014: 2), and the bitter diagnosis is that this leads to a ‘systematic organization of stupidity’ and the ‘liquidation of all trust and all hope’ (Stiegler, 2013: 67).

Although these new analyses à la Beller and Stiegler are based on an analysis of noetic technologies, we should note that their conclusions are similar to Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s insofar as the integration of individuals into the existing system, and their subsumption to value and commodity form, is still the main consequence of these new developments.

CONCLUSION

Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s reflections on the culture industry were written in ‘dark times’, and, despite all exaggerations, simplifications, and contemporary extensions, we would do well not to forget that the threat of a fascist world, authoritarian politics, meaningless propaganda, and the production of cultural consumption is with us every day, and, furthermore, that its promises are as empty as they were during the first half of the twentieth century. Given recent political, cultural, and technological developments,

one rather wonders whether, just on a higher level of development, we are in the process of moving back to precisely the same social, economic, and political condition that all early critical theorists endured. Marx’s definition of the proletariat as ‘subject without substance’ – the abstract Cartesian ego – can now be applied to all of us. We are emptied out as consumers and rendered abstract knowers. We consume products that no one needs and we know things that have no real content.

Notes

- 1 This charge can be found in much Anglo-American literature on how Adorno treats jazz music; however, see a defense of Adorno in Thompson, 2010.
- 2 For these charges, see Habermas, 1985: 138, 145, and 154. In this vein, we should not underestimate that Adorno participated very often in television and radio programs after his return to Germany. In addition, especially the public lectures on topics in education [*Erziehung*] and character formation [*Bildung*] highlight the fact that Adorno’s relation to mass media and public enlightenment is not entirely negative. For example, see his lecture on education after Auschwitz in GS 10.2: 674–690.
- 3 Already in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer look for openings, and especially in Adorno’s later writings it becomes clear that he begins to see the deeper ambivalences of mass entertainment; for this, see Kepler’s contribution in Klein et al., 2011: 257–60.
- 4 For this charge, see the overall thesis in Habermas, 1985.
- 5 For this charge, see, in the larger context of recent Frankfurt School theorizing, Allen, 2014.
- 6 Jameson does not see this historical connection in his threefold conception of culture as a social pattern, everyday life, and creative products (for this, see Jameson, 2007: 17). ‘Kultur’ also has a conservative ring to it in what is called ‘Kulturnation’ [nation of culture] and the political importance of German language and the arts for the ‘German identity’. Although Adorno and Horkheimer cannot be tied to this strand of thinking about culture, it nevertheless would be worthwhile to investigate how they still stick to what could be called a Germany-centered appropriation of the philosophical tradition and of world history.

- 7 We should also not mistake that the 'enemy' philosophers of critical theory, at least in Germany, tried to occupy the terrain of culture, too. For example, Adorno was opposed to a famous book, *Der Verlust der Mitte*, by art historian Hans Sedlmayr; and we should not forget that Martin Heidegger, in an important lecture after WWII entitled *Bauen, Wohnen, Denken*, which deals with architecture and building, refers to cultivation as a way of building and bringing out the essential possibilities in an entity, thereby explicitly bringing out its agricultural sense.
- 8 For more on this argument, see Skees, 2011. In this vein, we should note that Kant refers by 'spontaneity' (1) to the capacity of thought to synthesize objects, (2) to the capacity of the productive imagination [*Einbildungskraft*] to apprehend intuitions, as well as (3) to the foundation for the idea of freedom. Again, we can see that we find a subtle Kantian structure in the culture industry chapter.
- 9 This idea also runs through the (lost) German tradition of elevating museums, artists, language, poetry, and theatre to the level of national education.
- 10 I have argued in a recent essay that Lukács's reading of Marx is a 'productive misreading', since Marx's concept of commodity can already be read as a *social form*, i.e., as something that can shape the entirety of social relations and can therefore turn into the 'culture' of capitalism; for this argument, see Lotz, 2017a.
- 11 In recent decades there has been some research done to unveil the concrete mechanisms and political economy of the media industry (for an overview of this, see Cook, 1996: 27–51; for an overview of cultural economy, though to a large extent uncritical and orthodox, see Armin and Thrift, 2004; for a critical position, see Fuchs, 2015).
- 12 As an example of a misreading of the knowledge production in the culture industry, see Keppler's contribution in the most recent handbook on Adorno in Klein et al., 2011. She interprets the culture industry as a construction of the 'awareness of the complexity and the wealth of societal and individual reality' (2011: 261). In contrast, I would argue that, although her position is not entirely wrong, it reproduces the often misunderstood paradigm of 'false consciousness'. The theory that the media system is establishing a 'false consciousness' can also be found in the US-American left, including in Noam Chomsky's theory of 'Manufacturing Consent'. I try to indicate here that Adorno's concept of 'integration' should be located on the meta-level of establishing social unity and synthesis as knowledge of itself as capitalist society, which is not to be confused with how the media system schematizes information *about* social reality. In this vein, it would be worthwhile to think more about the relation between the culture industry and Althusser's concept of ideology as the establishment of an 'absolute subject'; for this, see Althusser, 2014. For a further attempt to think about the meta-level integration and the schematization of time and temporality, see my own attempt in Lotz, 2016.
- 13 For more on this, see Lotz, 2017b.
- 14 Seel and Keppler reduce the main features of industrially produced cultural products to manipulation and leveling (Seel and Keppler, 2004: 98). I would argue that they underestimate the 'logical' and schematic aspect of what makes cultural objects in a capitalist system possible. As a consequence, concepts that have a Kantian heritage, such as unity, identity, relation, etc., seem to be more adequate. Seel and Keppler argue against Adorno that there is a moment of non-identity in modern mass culture; for this argument, also see the analysis of consumer culture in Illouz, 1997. Illouz argues that the consumption of love as a commodity still contains an authentic promise.
- 15 For an extension of this idea and its relation to money, see Lotz, 2016.
- 16 For more on this point, see Gunster, 2000: 43.
- 17 For a discussion of the production of *non-communication*, see Baudrillard, 1981 and 1998.
- 18 The structure of promise and desire can also be analyzed with Marx's concept of use value, which the culture industry promises but never delivers (for this, see Haug, 1986).
- 19 The same modification would need to be made to Debord's concept of the spectacle and his thesis that 'the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images' (Debord, 2011: 17).
- 20 In this vein, although he had not yet grasped the full development towards what is now called 'cognitive' capitalism (Moulier-Boutang, 2012), Enzensberger already proposed extending the concept of culture industry to what he calls 'consciousness-industry' (Enzensberger, 1962: 7–17).

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