


COMMENT ON “CRITICAL STUDY FORM THE ENLIGHTENMENT THOUGHT TO THE CULTURAL INDUSTRY: FROM ADORNO’S PERSPECTIVE”


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COMMENT ON “CRITICAL STUDY FORM THE ENLIGHTENMENT THOUGHT TO THE CULTURAL INDUSTRY: FROM ADORNO’S PERSPECTIVE”

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Although Adorno and Horkheimer’s comprehensive reading of the culture industry, in the context of advanced capitalism, is astute and intelligent on most points –the critique of standardisation, ideological control or the reflection on the proper status of the nature of entertainment– it seems important to examine these arguments from a critical perspective, considering both their contributions and their limitations.

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that, in the process of cultural production, standardisation leads to a uniformity that eliminates –or at best corners– creativity and originality (Chen, 2024). This point is decisive insofar as it highlights how capitalism tends to turn art into a mass consumer product, which is driven more by the market than by genuine artistic expression. However, such a view may be overly pessimistic. While it is true that standardisation can lead to homogenisation, it is also true that the culture industry has made art accessible to a much wider public: never before have people had such easy access to the various manifestations of culture. Globalisation and technology have democratised such access, so that the culture industry is not merely a vehicle of standardisation, but also a carrier of the cultural transmission and democratisation.

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It is worth quoting John Fiske, who has drawn attention to the active role of the audience, considering that the audience not only interprets but also reinterprets the cultural products it consumes, which opens up space for creativity and subversion.

Fiske (2010, p. 32) argues that:

The process of making meaning out of the products of the culture industries is what constitutes popular culture, based on this active component, consumers of popular culture can create new and alternative meanings from standardised cultural products: If this is the case, standardisation would not necessarily eliminate creativity, but would be able, thanks to the audience, to transform and redistribute it: Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry.

It is indisputable that Adorno and Horkheimer's assertion about the culture industry can and does act as a means of ideological control is accurate and powerful. Cultural production, under the influence of advanced capitalism, is not arbitrary, but rather emerges as a tool whose purpose is the maintenance of ideological domination in the political realm. Antonio Gramsci made a similar point when he introduced his concept of hegemony to describe how the ruling class uses both coercion and consent to maintain its control:

The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as domination and as intellectual and moral leadership. A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise leadership before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to lead as well (Gramsci, 1971, p. 76).

However, it is important to recognise that ideological control is not absolute. Culture is a permanent battleground where dominant ideologies can be challenged at any time.

The current cultural movements –Black Lives Matter, MeToo, PETA, etc.– that use digital platforms, or even social media, to challenge hegemonic narratives, could serve as an example, demonstrating that technology and media can be used as a means of resistance and social protest, rather than only for control and manipulation of the masses.

Adorno and Horkheimer also criticise the culture industry for transforming entertainment into a kind of mass deception, promoting a superficial happiness that hides the true social, economic, political reality... And it is true that entertainment can be used for such purposes –to distract the masses from more serious and urgent issues– but it is also true that such a view suffers from excessive reductionism: entertainment is also a potential art form that offers solace, impulse or connection with others. Albeit in a more bitter way, Freud already drew attention to this: we cannot live without palliatives.

Other authors, such as Richard Dyer, have drawn attention to the fact that not all forms of entertainment are essentially superficial or manipulative, and that there are also forms of entertainment that harbour deep and meaningful criticisms. Hence, entertainment has a positive function.

The most valuable thing about entertainment is that it gives us a utopian vision; it may only be temporary through imagination and fantasy, but human beings need to believe that life can be improved. Entertainment offers the image of “something better” to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide (Dyer, 2002, p. 128).

From Dyer’s perspective, it is not only that entertainment does not deceive, but that it fundamentally inspires and offers a positive form of escape from reality.

In the Chinese context, where cultural development is strongly influenced by the intervention of market and state, Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critiques seem more than timely, offering useful guidance to avoid falling into a total commodification and ideological control of culture. However, it seems appropriate, as we have tried to point out from the outset, not to fall into a total rejection of the culture industry, but to recognise its benefits and integrate them into the context of the Frankfurian critique.

In short, while Adorno and Horkheimer’s criticisms of the culture industry are more than pertinent and give an acute picture of the dynamics of advanced capitalism, the value of the culture industry must not be radically denied. Standardisation and consequent homogenisation, ideological control and the problematisation of the nature of entertainment are real problems, but there are also counter-narratives of sorts that demonstrate the potential of popular culture to become a space of resistance, creativity and democratisation. For cultural development in China or in other countries, it is vitally important to try to strike a balance that opens space for critique and enhancing the cultural industry without completely dismissing its contributions and possibilities.

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