

Critical Thinking of Frankfurt School of Thought in Cultural Industry

Hanzhou Pa

*Changzhou Technical Institute of Tourism & Commerce, Changzhou, 213000, China
Hp05100@gmial.com*

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Abstract: Frankfurt School is an important school of Western Marxism and an influential school of thought in contemporary philosophy. This paper will critically consider the Frankfurt School from the perspective of cultural industry. The interdisciplinary nature of the Frankfurt School also makes the Frankfurt school to have a better understanding of the cultural industry. Even if we from now, we can also get inspirational thinking on the current social structure from Walter Benjamin's point of view.

1. Introduction

The Frankfurt School is a term used to refer to German and American scholars who reflected the changes in the Western societies and cultural structures that took place since the classical theory of Carl Marx (Bettig, 2002)^[1]. The mainstream thought of the school was also influenced by many western philosophical thoughts. One of the most significant focuses of the Frankfurt School was towards the establishment of the media culture and the increase in communication in social frameworks. The main scholars in Frankfurt school are Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. Therefore, the Frankfurt School reflects the social and political views of these scholars (Jeffries, 2017)^[2]. It is an academic community composed of a group of social science scholars, philosophers and cultural critics centering on the "Social Research Center" of the University of Frankfurt, Germany. The term culture industry was coined to reflect the boost in commercialisation and industrialisation under the capitalist regime in the west based on mass-production of cultural factors in the media. This essay provides a critical reflection of the contribution of Frankfurt School towards cultural industry. The Frankfurt School inherited and refined the main ideas of Marx. Their theories are strongly critical. However, its strong elitist views were criticized by later scholars.

2. Critical Thinking of Frankfurt School of Thought in Cultural Industry

Explaining in a broader manner, Kellner (2012)^[3] stated that the Frankfurt School can be considered as one of the first group of scholars to highlight the rise of the consumer society that included working class people. The Frankfurt School considered this group of working class society as the primary tool to cause a social revolution in Germany, however instead experienced a fascist Nazi party rise. Kellner (2012) also noted that the Frankfurt School were also dedicated towards analysing the changes in the capitalist society in the 19th century. The concept of cultural industry mainly focused on the commercialisation of creative arts that included television programs, books, movies, etc. The cultural industry considered all the aspects of the business such as production,

distribution, marketing and sales. In the contemporary scenario, the online and digital platforms can also be included in the concept of cultural industry. The Frankfurt School also reflected that the mass media and culture should be considered as integral part of the social development process as they have the ability of influence the perception of society and also share information with the mass population. Rebutisch and Trautmann (2018)^[4] also mentioned that the Frankfurt School also analysed the cultural industry from a political point of view wherein the focus was on the evolution of the working class groups to capitalists. This was regarded as the major indication that people are more sensitive owing to cultural industries, can influence the political scenario in a country and can trigger changes in political agencies and groups. This institute aimed at developing Marxism while adding a part of the cultural industry to Marxism. Since most of the scholars in the institute came from elites in various fields, the institute covered a wide range of fields and had plenty of interdisciplinary studies and theories (Adorno, 2020)^[5].

One of the most important contributions of the Frankfurt School can be observed based on their interpretation of the role of technology in the contemporary scenario. Adorno and Horkheimer (2020) explained that according to Frankfurt School, the way technological aspects were shaping in the 19th century; technology had the potential to influence social structures and political frameworks based on their influence on the cultural industries. Carrying forward this notion to the present day, it can be noted that Frankfurt School accurately predicted the role of technological significance in the daily lives of mass as well as their influence on the perception and information gathered by social structures. While experts such as Gotham and Krier (2008)^[6] criticised that Frankfurt School provided some vague situations in their critical thinking of the cultural industry as they are bound by the traditional means and cannot access to the society in a detailed manner to explain the changes in behaviour and thinking of social and political groups. Another important consideration that influenced the beliefs of Frankfurt School was during their stay in America wherein they observed the influence of capitalists on the cultural industry and came to believe that cultural industries are being controlled by big organisations that are commercialising the creative works and producing products that are influencing the choices of the working class (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2020). In other words, the Frankfurt School considered that the cultural industry was being manipulated by the capitalists towards commercialisation. At the same time, as the representatives of Frankfurt School scholars, Adorno and Horkheimer basically hold negative views towards the cultural industry. They believe that the existence and development of the cultural industry is a sign of the decline of capital's concern social. This is a serious alienation phenomenon. The operation of the cultural industry is promoted by the desires for money, and under the control of capitalism, the "personality" of people is eliminated by the cultural industry, with the characteristics of pseudo individualization. If individual consumers are completely controlled by capitalism, individual consumers' sense of freedom will be fully occupied, thus lose their judgment, imagination and creativity, and finally become the "one-way people". In brief, they can only unconsciously accept the values instilled to them by capitalism. We do not see that capitalism is squeezing and exploiting them, but in turn maintaining the cultural industries created by capitalism, accepting them more obediently, and immersing themselves in this false world. The public mistakenly believes that they have the right to make personal choices in their cultural consumption, but the opposite is true. The cultural products they buy just change the packaging style. More importantly, the programming in the cultural industry makes creation predictable and replicable. This is a rethinking of the cultural industry. This allows people to analyze the global culture industry with a new perspective and provides a valid theoretical resource for cultural studies or popular culture (Nealon, 2012)^[7].

The work of Walter Benjamin on the other hand reflected and stressed on the point that technology is bringing significant changes towards the creative arts wherein photography, movies and radio were creating more space for artists but the feeling and importance of originality are being lost (Khandizaji

and Caputi, 2021)^[8]. In Benjamin's book *"Art Works in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"*, the author pointed out that although cultural works in the "age of copying" lacked the authenticity and uniqueness of art, they made it possible for artworks to be widely disseminated and for more people to obtain access to artworks and better cultural works. This is something he is glad to see. Therefore, it is clear from his theories that he has a positive and moderate attitude toward the cultural industry. Nevertheless, his theories do not discuss whether artworks in the cultural industry control consumers (Collin, 2015)^[9]. Taking movies as an example, the bourgeoisie instills ideas in the plots and images of movies to better control the audience's aesthetics. At the same time, it allows the audiences to believe that their minds are "free". This subtle change in the bourgeoisie can better dominate the masses, seduce and deceive consumers and thus occasionally prefer antagonistic developments (Berman, 1989)^[10]. Via this measure, the bourgeoisie constrains people's speech and denies them the right to create freely. Another theorist Rudolf Hilferding focused on the growing influence of capitalism on the cultural industry and coined the term organised capitalism that referred to the monopoly of big corporations that made the working class submit to their norms and state control (Rebentisch and Trautmann, 2018). Relating this to the contemporary scenario wherein online activities of the working class is largely associated with social networking platforms, although there is limited hint of monopoly, big brands such as Google, Twitter and Facebook have significant control over the information of their users. The cultural industry concept of the Frankfurt School mainly focused on the mass production of emotions and its consumption among the working-class people and that makes them obedient towards the existing social regime and reduces their revolutionary instincts. Nevertheless, in the contemporary scenario, inclusion of information technology in the cultural industry has significantly increased awareness among people and rational decision making and ability to stand against tyranny is also on the rise in various social structures. People's interpretation of events has also become diversified. For instance, there is a talk show in China where the stand-up comedians say the phrase "ordinary but confident". As for the interpretation of this phrase, Chinese is divided into many schools of thought, the most notably confrontation between men and women, which is also what capitalism is happy to see and creates more topics for the show. But it also allows the public to interpret variety show from a different perspective, leading people have a more neutral attitude towards variety shows.

There have been many controversies in the society about the Frankfurt School. If studying the Frankfurt School is as a philosophical school, it is concluded that their critique for self is not comprehensive enough and there is serious infighting among the represented ideologist. For example, from Adorno (the scholar of the first-generation) to Honneth (the scholar of the third-generation), their main ideas and theories are changing. Adorno, as the pioneer of postmodernism, laid down the research of Frankfurt School in his book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which is an improved idea based on Marxism. However, in the third generation of scholars Honneth, as a radical left-wing thinker, directly advanced the study of Hegel's theory of thought from Marx's (Bottomore, 2002)^[11]. Therefore, the research ideas of these represented scholars are constantly changing, resulting in an imperfect theory of the Frankfurt School and no unified theoretical framework to support the Frankfurt School. Scholars who inherited Adorno's ideas paid more attention to the critique for both the cultural industry and the society. Whereas the later researchers of Honneth, were more inclined to the field of social philosophy. The mainstream of Frankfurt thought is now also diametrically opposed in terms of academic methods and perspectives. Secondly, the conflicting and contradictory theories of the Frankfurt School led to that the original intention of this school was to solve the social and philosophical problems in the post-Enlightenment period. Nevertheless, it has not been able to solve the main problems of twentieth century philosophy up to now. Even a perfect answer has not been given by the whole school. Adorno mainly criticized the culture industry, arguing that it had largely consolidated the current political power instead of creating a better society. From the perspective of

technology, Marcuse viewed the culture industry and argued that the changes brought by technology have turned people into more materialistic-powerful and unthinking one-sided. But viewing the arguments, they all inspired people to think, but they did not propose a corresponding answer to this argument or question, resulting us still not know how we should make changes in the future. Therefore, their theories are not perfect. Khandizaji (2017)^[12] argues that the biggest problem in the Frankfurt School is their methodology. As a school in social sciences, the reason for the why Frankfurt School was criticized by the public is that they are confirmationist without a suitable methodology, especially since some of their theories are proposed through psychology, mass communication or sociology. However, there is no methodology to verify their theories. As one of the represented scholars, Adorno's theories and absolute denial are more behavioristic and more flawed, respectively. Taking the TV series as the case study, the Frankfurt School discusses the culture industry isolatedly, seeing the audience as the passive party of the culture industry. This lacks a dialectical view for the event, and if more mobility is brought by the audience, it becomes more clear that perhaps the developer or director of the TV series is the passive party, while the audience, as the active party, can choose the content and quality of the TV series. The Frankfurt School theory only focuses on the critique of the capitalist communication system at the macro level, and the study of specific issues in the social communication process is not comprehensive, while lacking positivism.

3M of the Frankfurt School, is a fusion of Marxism, Maoism and Marcuseis. The Frankfurt School claims to have fused the ideas of the 3M while encouraging its audiences to engage in a revolutionary movement. This Western movement with 3M that is essentially divorced from consideration of actual society. Like the elite culture praised highly by the Frankfurt School, they lack understanding and substantive analysis of public culture or popular culture. For the understanding of Frankfurt's theory, we need to learn with a rational and calm attitude, and have a trade-off view.

3. Conclusion

The Frankfurt School of thought mainly focused on the influence of capitalism on the cultural industry that comprised of creative arts. The aim of the Frankfurt School was to initiate a revolution in the working class of society to disrupt the control of political agencies and divert a significant amount of authority on the working class of society. However, the increasing influence of capitalism on cultural industry was considered as a major obstruction that can bend the will of the society to capitalist control. The role of technology in the development of cultural industry was also predicated by Frankfurt School. The critical thinking towards cultural industry also reflected the need to reduce the control of the cultural industry by capitalist to ensure absence of monopoly. Although other models such as Walter Benjamin provided a better viewpoint of the role of technology in cultural industry, Frankfurt School was able to signify the importance of media in social structures during the peak of capitalism.

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