

Alienation, Commodification, and Ideologization: The Convergence: Mass Culture as the "Social Cement"

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Abstract: True art possesses creativity and individuality, yet the cultural industry system established in capitalist societies transforms art into pure commodities, incorporating it into the process of commodity exchange. Exchange value supersedes use value, and the economic benefits of cultural products overshadow their social benefits. Through the deliberate standardization and selection of cultural products delivered to the masses, what the public perceives as leisure and free time also becomes part of a mechanized operation. These commodities have become new tools for interest groups to covertly dominate and imprison human thought. Under the worship of technical rationality, the slogans of enlightenment have turned into ignorance itself. Adorno pioneered the critique of the cultural industry, initiating a comprehensive and all-encompassing critique of mass culture with a unique theoretical perspective and sense of inquiry.

1. Introduction

Adorno believed that the emergence of the cultural industry confines human thought within an inherent framework, even if this framework is covert and entraps individuals unknowingly. Products of varied forms share the same systemic framework;^[1] the ruling class governs the masses in a hidden and cunning manner; the cultural industry subsumes the psychologically defenseless masses. With "Negative Dialectics" as the theoretical foreground, Adorno's critique of the cultural industry is undoubtedly an absolute negation. This logical trajectory also pushes the critique of the cultural industry into an abyss of negation, providing fertile ground for its inherent pessimistic tendencies. The romanticism of art is lost, cultural products on shelves focus solely on exchange value, and the cultural industry, as a large-scale operation system that pursues profit, maintains the rule of interest groups, and numbs the public's thought, turns enlightenment into mass deception.

2. The Alienation of Mass Culture

Adorno's critique of mass culture unfolds within the narrow definition of "culture," distinct from the broader culture that includes political economy and religious art, which is different from nature. Culture, as a form filled with artistry and creativity, should reflect a friendly connection between the individual and the world, a manifestation of individuality. However, in the capitalist industrial society, the intervention of capital and economy has led to the alienation of the cultural field, where

culture loses its original artistry and individuality and is replaced by cultural "commodities" mass-produced in factories in an assembly line fashion. Uniformity and mechanization characterize this type of culture.

2.1. The Loss of Artistic Romanticism

"Artistic work is real work, which seems to arise from a non-repressive instinctual structure and has a non-repressive goal." Under the dominance of capital logic, nature becomes alienated, labor becomes alienated labor, and the subjectivity of the individual is lost, becoming one-dimensional. At this time, art becomes a splash of color in this desert world, a point of full expression of inner freedom and individuality. In this fully alienated world, art is even more an inherent force of resistance, possessing transcendence. Adorno points out: "The element of resistance is inherently present in the most sublime art."

As the pursuit and worship of technical rationality peak, art begins to lose its transcendence, negation, and individuality, packaging the same elements in different combinations. After going through the assembly line process, it gradually becomes mass culture with uniformity and reproducibility. Compared to the purity and romanticism pursued by art, the current cultural industry focuses on the impact on the audience and the benefits it can obtain. As Adorno points out in "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture,"^[2] today's art no longer focuses on the intrinsic connections of artworks, losing the fantasy of romanticism and becoming a type of commodity. Mass-produced products lack content and meaning; they are identical things after being disassembled. Products no longer have any individuality; the emergence and systematized production of the cultural industry leave products as nothing but empty shells after replication. Technical rationality allows for individual progress, but it also comes with the dissolution of the individual's own cost. Under the industrial cultural system, ways to obtain entertainment are quick and rapid, and the stimulation of the cerebral cortex by various products is fierce and brief. People indulge in readily available "happiness," thus moving further away from the true art that carries a sense of depth and alienation.^[3]

2.2. The Schematized Operation of Counter-Enlightenment

Cultural manufacturers continuously provide consumers with pre-designed products; at the same time, once the system is formed and begins to operate, consumers become schematized. Schematization is an important strategy to ensure that consumers follow the predetermined path. In a world seemingly composed of pure objectivity, individuals produce a world that conforms to their will through conceptual tools or schemas. The cultural industry produces a variety of cultural products, including pop songs, movie stars, and soap operas, which are actually the products of artificially recombined and processed elements and materials, with the traces of processing eliminated.

Adorno points out in "Dialectic of Enlightenment": "Culture puts the same label on everything."^[4] Under the dominance of the cultural industry, everything is labeled with the same essence. Just as there is no individuality but only homogenization in the cultural industry system, the will here is also obscured, a false individual will. It seems that individuals' material and spiritual needs are greatly satisfied, with more diverse choices. But all of this is incorporated into the framework of capital logic. Under capital logic, only by constructing the system of the cultural industry and employing the strategy of schematization can individual thinking be restricted, and individual behavior be standardized within the permitted range of maintaining social development.

2.3. False Culture

In addition to confining the production and reproduction of art, the logical system of the cultural industry also consciously guides the audience's aesthetic tastes and preferences. With the development of productive forces and scientific and technological progress, people have more "free" leisure time. "As soon as a person has leisure time, he has to accept the products provided by cultural manufacturers."^[2] A variety of entertainment forms flood people's sensory systems, soothing tired bodies and minds in jazz, movies, soap operas, and variety shows, restoring spirit and vitality, ready to face a new day's work and challenges with a more full spirit. This picture painted by capital is so beautiful, so vast, that it indulges the public unconsciously and willingly, unable to extricate themselves. There is a plethora of entertainment products, numerous and countless. Hidden under the false bubble of freedom and pleasure is the modular system architecture set up by the cultural industry in advance, and unique innovation is nothing more than an improved method of mass production. The dazzling array of cultural products accepted by the public is nothing but a pre-set framework. These are not individual autonomous choices; the public has never had the right to freely dispose of their leisure time. In the end, the public has never escaped the framework of capital, even after the end of tiring and monotonous work, still in the mechanical labor, in the world "carefully" constructed by capital for the workers. It seems to increase the happiness index of workers, satisfying higher needs beyond survival, but it is nothing more than a strategy to beautify and make excuses for workers to invest more quickly in production.^[4]

The development of science and technology, along with the advancement of productivity, has brought convenience to people, enhanced work efficiency, and to a certain extent, increased the happiness in life. However, this is accompanied by environmental pollution and cultural dilemmas caused by the irrational misuse of rationality. This is precisely the focus of the Frankfurt School's critique, which states that "the myth destroyed by enlightenment is, in fact, a product of enlightenment itself." The criticism of enlightenment and rationality reached its peak after the two World Wars. In Adorno's view, there is also an intricate relationship between the culture industry and technical rationality. It is the invasion of technical rationality into the cultural sphere that leads to the homogenization of cultural products, causing art to lose its romantic qualities and individuals to lose their subjectivity and creativity.

3. The Commodification of Popular Culture

The Frankfurt School posits that against the backdrop of rapid scientific and technological development and the flourishing of the culture industry, popular culture at this time has lost its artistic authenticity, its inherent creativity, and uniqueness. Instead, it has been replaced by commodities "with the same label," priced openly, and characterized by commodity fetishism.

3.1. The Duality of Popular Culture

Popular culture, unlike art that is creative and individualistic, has the combined characteristics of spiritual products and commodity products. From this description, popular culture sells spiritual products to the masses in the form of commodities to satisfy their spiritual needs. However, in a capitalist society thoroughly infiltrated by the culture industry, popular culture under the logic of capital will inevitably prioritize profit. The products produced by a complete industrial system can greatly reduce costs in the pursuit of more benefits. Compared to the profits, the social benefits that popular culture should have are completely ignored. Cultural products that have lost individuality become pure commodities for exchange, and the function and impact of spiritual products are increasingly weakened.

As popular culture develops in an increasingly distorted direction, the masses' attitude toward "art" also changes. Compared to true works of art that maintain a distance, now these false and packaged commodities more easily resonate on a superficial level. "Due to the abundance of cheap products, the industrial society deceives the public in various ways," art takes on a commodified nature, with its production and consumption being incorporated into the economic realm;^[1] its characteristics also transform into uniformity and mechanization, a necessary result of capital's intervention and the maturity of the culture industry system. Notably, in this state, the individual's demand for art also becomes perverted, seeking only ephemeral, shallow entertainment to pass the time. All cultural creation processes are just to be better integrated into the mechanized assembly line; all the exquisite packaging and "rich content" displayed to the masses are just different combinations or production routes; all cultural exhibitions and creative activities are only to gain more profit, making the masses pay for it. In this world full of capital and completely alienated labor, even affirmative culture that wants to resist objectification can only tie the satisfaction of individual needs to the economy and the market, and ultimately this resistance is doomed to fail.

3.2. "Commodities" Integrated into the Market Exchange Track

"Commodification" and "commodity fetishism" are key labels that the Frankfurt School, including Adorno, have attached to popular culture. These are cultural products that have lost artistry and independence, filled with mechanization and uniformity. This is the result of the development of instrumental rationality and capital's intervention in culture. It is this overemphasis on exchange value over use value, the pursuit of profit over economic efficiency, that takes cultural products further away from true art, becoming an important means for capital to gain profits, maintain rule, and dominate psychology. The cultural products needed by capital must maximize their exchange value, the purpose being to gain more benefits; while art filled with romantic sentiment does not conform to the current principle of "purposelessness within purposiveness." Thus, artworks become commodities, items labeled for exchange, no longer full of rich inner implications, no longer having a colorful connection with the world.^[2]

The value of an artwork is no longer determined by its profound content and aesthetic value, not by how much effort the creator has put in, nor by being a vessel for the creator's soul, but by how much exchange value it can produce in market transactions. The cultural industry of Western capitalist society, with real industrial sectors like oil and steel as its breeding ground, thus determines that it must be closely linked with the economy. And the more the economy permeates the cultural system and the closer the culture is combined with media, the more absurd and laughable the masses' blind pursuit and consumption of culture become. Under capital's intervention, the culture industry system closely linked with the economy inevitably will not focus on the real inner needs of consumers, will not aim to serve the public or provide social benefits with any cultural products. This is precisely why culture has lost its creativity, has homogenized, uniform characteristics. Art can no longer express rich inner emotions, establish individualized connections with the world, but becomes a commodity awaiting sale, entering the track of market exchange. Adorno uses the short story as an example, pointing out that the short story "must strictly adhere to an appropriate length. Even humor, personal feelings, and jokes, like the backgrounds they belong to, are all calculated." The "ideological state apparatus" that integrates consumers using industrial culture and media has been launched.

4. The Ideologization of Popular Culture

For Adorno, the mass production of standardized products continuously flows to the market under the cultural industry system, achieving domination over the masses quietly through media

such as newspapers and television. The popular culture Adorno refers to is not an entertainment culture that serves the public or arises from the bottom up, but rather, with the development of science and technology, it is a reproductive industrial product clad in the guise of autonomy and freedom. Capital provides consumers with a variety of choices, fully granting the public rights and freedom, but hidden beneath this appearance is a form of "anti-culture," intended to obscure their intent to control and numb people's minds to maintain capitalist rule.

4.1. Critique Based on the Logical System of "Negative Dialectics"

Adorno sees current popular culture as stamped with homogenization and systemization. He views the culture industry as a synonym for capitalist totalitarian rule, where capital plays the role of "social cement," consolidating dominance and maintaining social "stability." Adorno believes that these mass cultures have non-historical and immutable characteristics. The critique of the culture industry is ruthless and absolutely negative. While certainly influenced by European rationalism and elitist cultural stance, it essentially stems from its logical system, which is the absolute negation emphasized in "Negative Dialectics," replacing identity with non-identity.^[2]

Here, negation not only runs through "Negative Dialectics" but also through "Dialectic of Enlightenment." In the preface to "Negative Dialectics," Adorno straightforwardly reveals his intention to rid dialectics of affirmative characteristics, truly focusing on negation, on the theme of comprehensive negation. "As early as in Plato's time, dialectics meant achieving something affirmative through negation... This book attempts to make dialectics shed this affirmative characteristic." Adorno consistently negates capitalist society, capitalist production modes, the culture industry, everything. Ultimately, the negative dialectics within this framework of absolute negation are also negated.

4.2. The Function of the Culture Industry in Manipulating Mass Psychology

The culture industry is like a system with a complete setup and precise instruments, filtering all cultural products before delivering them to the masses via media such as television and newspapers. This systematic and patterned production mode integrates the entire world in an aberrant way, aiming to control and obscure the public's perception. Products with the same components and structure are delivered to consumers after recombination and trace erasure, creating seemingly personalized and innovative products, fostering an illusion of diversity.^[5]

This "pseudo-personalization" is not to soothe consumers' emotions or to care for them at moral low points but to ensure the normal operation and functioning of the pattern. The maintenance of this pattern relies not only on "pseudo-personalization" but also on controlling mass psychology. In this analysis, Adorno fully incorporates Freud's tripartite psychological structure of id, ego, and superego. After the intervention of science, technology, and capitalist logic in the cultural field, the culture industry, with both economic and social status, naturally replaces the father's position in the family, and children no longer internalize the father as a value.

The potential "resistance" in the new society no longer exists. The loss of autonomy and the disappearance of resistance allow the culture industry, combining the superego and id, to completely take over the authoritative position of controlling human psychology. This beautiful and vast tapestry not only soothes the weary bodies and minds of workers but also blurs the boundaries between reality and beautiful dreams. "People who watch movies often will see the external world as an extension of the film they just watched... Now it's easier for people to be under the illusion that the external world is just as direct and continuous as the world presented on the screen." The more refined and tight the film production, the stronger the deception of the masses.^[3]

Compact plotlines and developments only attract the viewers' gaze, forcing them to

automatically or semi-automatically engage their thoughts to keep up with the plot, leaving no time for divergence and fantasy. This has little to do with the content of the film; the essence of the "running" of the talkies dictates that the culture industry inevitably cannot leave a lasting impression in consumers' minds. In this era of high social integration, workers unconsciously or consciously comply with the schedules set by interest groups, "enjoying" systematic and homogenized cultural or leisure products, indulging, knowingly or unknowingly, in the framework of capital. Adorno points out that individuals will never have individuality in a capitalist society; "individuality is an illusion," and only by obeying the will and following the rules can one achieve social collective integration. The world under the capitalist system does not allow for the existence of individuality, nor does individuality exist.

As Adorno says, "The overall effect of the culture industry is a kind of counter-Enlightenment," it transforms enlightenment into "mass deception." The culture industry sells consumers a single cultural product in a fancy package, with the aim of dissolving subjectivity, dulling creativity, numbing the senses, and forever imprisoning people under the logical system of capital.

4.3. Popular Culture as "Social Cement"

As an important representative of the Frankfurt School, Adorno initiated the criticism of culture and the masses, comparing the interest groups under the capitalist system to "social cement." He believes that the cultural products provided by the culture industry to the masses are homogeneous, singular, non-artistic, and non-creative. Based on the logical framework of "Negative Dialectics" and utopian aesthetic interests, Adorno's critique of the culture industry is undoubtedly fierce. Different from the previous "violent rule," the form of rule in the late capitalist society is hidden behind a compassionate mask, even giving the illusion that the rule no longer exists. "The culture industry refutes all criticisms against it and the world it replicates."^[4]

This is also Adorno's definition of late capitalist society, where the form and method of rule have greatly changed under the development of science and technology and the internal drive of capital logic. This form of rule is silent, easily accepted by the masses, and even difficult for the masses to detect. Taking film as an example, the emergence of film has pushed the capitalist obfuscation of the masses to a climactic stage. Fragmented, discontinuous, repetitive, and single modules are recombined in different ways and forms in assembly-line-like factories.

The more complex and ingenious the recombination, the more it can capture the audience's eyes, and the higher the degree of obscuring the audience's ears and blinding their eyes. Without a doubt, capital intends to "implant" will and ideas into the masses' minds with the intention of control, obscuring, and benighting, but in practice, no matter how close to the masses, no matter how hard it tries to engage the public's attention and resonance, there will still be a gap between the two. What the culture industry wants to shape and transmit will not be fully accepted by the masses. Therefore, to better achieve its purpose and narrow the gap between the two, the culture industry shifts its focus to "informality," "non-orthodoxy," and even quirky and novel fields. This form is often more readily accepted by the audience, causing them to fall unknowingly into the same new traps as before. Actions like making cultural products more "informal" are numerous, and these efforts by the culture industry are just to make more people able to attach to society, to live numbly, believing themselves to be happy and comfortable in this wholly alienated world. Adorno, based on a narrow conception of "culture," launches a comprehensive and fierce critique of popular culture.^[5]

The incursion of capital into culture in developed industrial societies has led to the alienation of culture, turning it into a product with reproductive and mechanical characteristics, losing its inherent artistry and creativity. At the same time, popular culture has also become an ideological tool of the ruling class, numbing the public's thoughts in a more secretive and more acceptable way,

becoming the "social cement" that maintains the rule and interests of the ruling class.

5. Conclusion

In the tide of capital, mass culture has undergone unprecedented alienation, commodification, and ideologization. This process not only strips away the essence of culture but also transforms it into "social cement" that upholds the existing social structure. Adorno's vehement critique reveals the mechanisms behind this transformation, pointing out how the culture industry uses instrumental reason to reduce creative art to a tool that numbs the emotions of the masses and upholds the order of dominance. Although his critique is filled with pessimism, it also inspires us to reflect: How can we preserve the independence and creativity of culture while pursuing economic efficiency? How can we ensure that the expression of art and individuality is not assimilated by market logic? Only by doing so can we break free from the chains of commodification and return to a truly rich and free cultural life.

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