


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


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

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The main focus of this article is to explore the criticism of the cultural industry from the perspective of Enlightenment thought. The Enlightenment played a significant role in cultural criticism by promoting the human society’s creative transformation and challenging existing power structures. To understand Adorno’s critical theory of the cultural industry, it is important to recognize the essential significance of Enlightenment thought and its dialectical nature. The article aims to reinterpret the criticism of the cultural industry by incorporating Enlightenment thought. While acknowledging that Enlightenment thought was not without its contradictions, it highlights the coexistence of different understandings within the framework of Enlightenment thought. These contradictions are seen as essential for future historical development, and the criticism of the cultural industry is seen as an important driver for cultural advancement. Overall, the article seeks to shed light on the relationship between Enlightenment thought, cultural criticism and the promotion of cultural construction. By analyzing the essential significance of Enlightenment thought and its dialectical nature, the article aims to provide a new perspective on the criticism of the cultural industry and its role in fostering cultural development.

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Enlightenment thoughts have emerged worldwide, with the European Enlightenment and the Chinese “May 4th” Enlightenment being the most representative ones. The Enlightenment process involves the emergence, formation, and development of concepts and values in a new era. However, during this process, ideas compete and evolve, and the dominant ones eventually become recognized as Enlightenment movements. It is important to note that Enlightenment does not equal formal education, and it is not driven by a single “educator.”

In the context of China’s cultural transformation, some traditional cultures have become disconnected from modern life, affecting people’s lives. The cultural industry, as a product of modern society’s productive forces, has its challenges. Adorno’s critical thoughts on the cultural industry played a crucial role in the Enlightenment thoughts of the Frankfurt School. He believed that the emphasis of the cultural industry on material worship marked the decline of true art and led to standardization and control over individuals and society.

Platformization can transform the political economy of the cultural industry, providing opportunities for critical dialogue. Understanding pedagogical function of popular culture is crucial in addressing contemporary discrimination issues. Adorno’s critical theory of the cultural industry retains its value in critiquing modern popular culture and aiming to establish a theory for modernist art and a way to criticize the alienated reality of capitalism through art.

1 THE CRITICAL THEORY OF CULTURAL INDUSTRY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ADORNO

The critical theory of the cultural industry, as formulated by Theodor Adorno, offers a unique perspective on the relationship between culture, capitalism and social control. Adorno was a prominent member of the Frankfurt School, a group of critical theorists who sought to analyze and critique the capitalist societies’ dominant social, economic and cultural structures.

Adorno’s analysis of the cultural industry stems from his broader critique of the effects of capitalism on society and individuals. He argued that the cultural industry, which encompasses mass media, entertainment and popular culture, functions as a powerful tool of social control and manipulation (Feng, 2020, p. 253). Adorno contended that the cultural industry is not a neutral sphere of artistic expression, but rather a commodified system that produces standardized, formulaic and mass-produced cultural products that cater to the demands of capitalism.

According to Adorno, the cultural industry operates through the standardization and homogenization of cultural products, resulting in a loss of individuality, creativity and critical thinking. He argued that these mass-produced cultural products, such as popular

music, films and television shows, contribute to the creation of a passive and conformist society. Adorno believed that the cultural industry, driven by profit motives, promotes a false sense of happiness and satisfaction while obscuring the underlying social and economic inequalities and reinforcing the existing power structures.

Adorno criticized the influence of the culture industry on consumers, arguing that it leads to the standardization of tastes and the suppression of genuine artistic and intellectual engagement. He posited that the cultural industry fosters a passive and uncritical consumption of culture, suppressing the potential for critical reflection and social change (Li, 2012, p. 63).

Adorno’s critical theory of the cultural industry calls for an emancipatory transformation of culture and society’s one. He advocated for a culture that resists commodification and mass production, and instead promotes individuality, creativity and critical consciousness. Adorno argued that genuine art and culture should challenge the prevailing social order and open up possibilities for alternative ways of thinking and living. Adorno’s critical theory of the cultural industry continues to be influential in contemporary cultural studies, media studies and critical theory. It offers a powerful critique of the commodification of culture and encourages critical engagement with the dominant forms of cultural production in capitalist societies.

2 ENLIGHTENMENT AND ANTI-ENLIGHTENMENT OF CULTURAL INDUSTRY

Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of standardization in the cultural industry, as presented in their book “Dialectics of Enlightenment,” highlights the negative effects of mass-produced sameness in cultural products. Driven by the pursuit of profit, the standardized assembly line production model reduces production costs, but also limits artistic vision. Creators tend to follow market directions dictated by capital rather than expressing their own love for art, resulting in an influx of similar works that lack intrinsic value.

The uniformity of cultural goods, in the standardized cultural industry, creates a cultural bubble where creativity and innovation are suppressed. Individuals are constrained by a standardized perception of culture, leading to an impoverishment of society’s cultural landscape. Horkheimer argued that personality becomes false in such an environment, as individuals conform to the general society and lose their critical thinking abilities. Cultural products designed to meet diverse cultural needs end up enforcing passive acceptance of ideas transmitted by ruling elites.

Adorno added that interest and imitation drive the standardization of cultural products, leading people to seek familiarity in cultural goods. This perpetuates a cycle of conformity that stifles creativity and perpetuates a lack of originality. Overall, the critique of standardization by Horkheimer and Adorno highlights the dangers of reducing culture to

mere commodities and the importance of preserving individuality and critical thinking in the cultural landscape.

The concept of Enlightenment and its relationship to the cultural industry can be understood through the critical theorists' works, like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who were part of the Frankfurt School. They explored the tension between Enlightenment ideals and the commodification of culture in capitalist societies.

The Enlightenment, an intellectual and philosophical movement of the 17th and 18th centuries, emphasized reason, science and human progress. It sought to challenge traditional authority and promote individual freedom, rationality and critical thinking. The Enlightenment thinkers believed in the potential of reason to liberate individuals from ignorance, superstition and oppressive social structures (Robinson, 2017, p. 171).

However, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the ideals of reason and progress of the Enlightenment had been distorted and co-opted by capitalist societies. They contended that the cultural industry, as a product of capitalism, turned the ideals of the Enlightenment into commodities that perpetuate conformity and false consciousness. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the cultural industry produces mass-produced cultural products that are designed to cater to the masses' tastes and preferences. These products, such as popular music, films and television shows, are standardized and formulaic, lacking artistic and intellectual depth. They argued that the cultural industry promotes a false sense of happiness and fulfillment, diverting individuals' attention away from social and economic inequalities. In this sense, the cultural industry represents the capitalist societies' anti-Enlightenment aspect. It replaces critical thinking and independent judgment with passive consumption and conformity. Adorno and Horkheimer saw the cultural industry as a form of social control, where individuals are conditioned to accept and conform to the dominant cultural and economic order.

However, it is important to note that Adorno and Horkheimer did not reject the Enlightenment project entirely. They believed in the potential of critical thinking and emancipatory knowledge to challenge the capitalist societies' oppressive aspects. Their critique of the cultural industry was aimed at exposing the ways in which capitalism co-opts and commodifies Enlightenment ideals for its own benefit. Overall, the tension between Enlightenment ideals and the cultural industry lies in the distortion and manipulation of reason and progress in capitalist societies. Critical theorists, like Adorno and Horkheimer, sought to highlight these contradictions and call for a critical engagement with the cultural industry as a means to reclaim the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment project (Talamante; Jasmine, 2021, p. 37).

The cultural industry, driven by modern technology, reproduces and disseminates commercialized cultural works on a large scale. In contemporary capitalism, culture has

become more than just art. It has become a means of survival. However, the cultural industry, characterized by standardization, commercialization and technicalization, warrants criticism. It serves as a pseudo-art that accumulates wealth within the capitalist system. Adorno’s critical thinking provides valuable insights to individuals in navigating the negative effects of the cultural industry while leveraging its positive impacts to promote multiculturalism. Adorno’s criticism of the cultural industry does not oppose Enlightenment thinking, but rather offers a rational evaluation of its nature.

However, when considering China’s cultural development, it is important not to solely focus on criticism, but also acknowledge the enthusiasm of the cultural industry. Adorno’s critique serves as an extension of Enlightenment ideology and reflects a practical requirement for China’s cultural industry. It holds significant importance for the reconstruction and development of Chinese culture.

Much like women’s luxury bags, the demand for such luxury goods was initially dispensable. However, capitalists have stimulated this demand through the market, barring the public from participating in the creation of capital. While such consumption may bring temporary happiness, it ultimately constrains individuals. Horkheimer and Adorno criticize the cultural industry as a negative force that leads to the loss of popularity and development of the culture. The production goal of the cultural industry has shifted from meeting people’s cultural needs to satisfying the profits of capitalism. It has become closely linked to the bourgeoisie’s pursuits and a means of ideological control, resulting in the gradual depletion of cultural spirit while the cultural market thrives. This raises an alarm for the construction of socialist cultural endeavors. To promote cultural development, cultural and creative products and activities should be carried out in a certain cultural context, passing on culture in the process. The cultural industry serves an entertainment function, allowing people to relax, exercise, exchange emotions, and contribute to social and economic development.

CONCLUSIONS

The cultural industry is a modern entertainment industry that uses technology to reproduce and distribute commercialized cultural works on a large scale. In the context of modern capitalism, culture has become not just art, but also a means of survival. However, the cultural industry, characterized by standardization, commercialization and technicalization, deserves criticism as it can be seen as a pseudo-art and a means of accumulating wealth under the capitalist system.

Adorno’s critical thinking offers valuable insights for individuals to avoid the negative effects of the cultural industry while harnessing its positive impact on promoting multiculturalism and cultural prosperity. His critique of the cultural industry is not in

conflict with Enlightenment thoughts, but rather provides a rational assessment of its nature. In China's cultural development, it is essential to strike a balance between criticizing the cultural industry and recognizing its potential and enthusiasm. Adorno's criticism is not only an extension of Enlightenment ideology, but also addresses practical requirements in China's real-life situation, contributing significantly to the reconstruction and development of the country's cultural industry.

In the development of culture, it is crucial to adhere to the correct theoretical direction, recognize the people's creative subject status and respect the inherent laws of cultural development. This approach will protect the artistic independence of culture while effectively utilizing modern technological means for cultural construction. Embracing the path of cultural development in Socialism, with Chinese characteristics, is the key to building a new generation of cultural power. This is our comment to Chen (2024).

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