

## MEVIT 2110 POPULAR CULTURE

### Lecture 23 March 2006: Adorno and Horkheimer's "Culture Industries" (1947)

Some words and names A&H think we all know:

**Balzac**, Honoré de: French author.

**Dagwood**: Comic strip about an office clerk. Known as *Dagobert* in Norway.

**Discord**: In music, two tones that sound "unstable" or "unsettling" when played together. By changing one of them, the discord may be *resolved*.

**Es Muss Sein**: (it has to be) Beethoven wrote this above the music in the score of one of his late string quartets. Some biographers think the music at that point expresses his anger and despair of becoming deaf, A&H thinks he was angry that his housekeeper demanded her pay check.

**Harmony**: in music, how two or more tones sound together.

**Hays Office**: Film censor institution in USA at the time.

**Hugo**, Victor: French author

**Lombardo**, Guy: popular singer

**Mrs. Miniver**: Extremely popular 1942 British film.

**Palestrina**: Renaissance composer, known for his strict rules of harmony.

**Schönberg**, Arnold: Austrian composer, inventor of atonal music. Adorno's composition teacher.

**Syncopation**: In music, defined as accentuating a note that does not fall on the beat. Jazz rhythm. If you tap your foot to the rhythm, the syncopations are the long, or strong, or important notes that are between the taps of your foot.

**Toscanini**, Arturo: World-famous orchestra conductor.

**Tristan**: *Tristan and Isolde*, Opera by Wagner.

**Welles**, Orson: American actor, director of theatre, radio plays and film. Made the groundbreaking film *Citizen Kane* in 1941, which still many consider the best film ever made.



Theodor W. Adorno  
(1903–1969)



Max Horkheimer  
(1895–1973)

## Adorno and Horkheimer

# MAJOR POINTS

### 1) All culture everywhere has become similar

Still, we are to believe that the taste of the public directs the cultural products. Different genres are not made to suit different tastes, but to organize and label the consumers. "The reconciliation of the general and particular, of the rule and the specific demands of the subject matter, the achievement of which alone gives essential, meaningful content to style, is futile because there has ceased to be the slightest tension between opposite poles: these concordant extremes are dimly identical; the general can replace the particular, and vice versa" (130).

### 2) The reason for the similarity is the interest of those in economic power

It is a system that keeps society the way it is. "Having ceased to be anything but style, it [the cultural industry] reveals the latter's secret: obedience to the social hierarchy" (131). The cultural industries are born of liberalism, and like liberalism, they allow (or are made to allow) some people to rise to the top. "[F]reedom to choose an ideology—since ideology always reflects economic coercion—everywhere proves to be freedom to choose what is always the same" (167).

### 3) The function of industrial culture is distraction

To be able to stand the *alienation* of (feeling of no connection with or interest in) work, workers need to distract in their *spare time*—a concept which in itself has no meaning without the existence of alienating work. Kant said true art requires the viewer (or listener) to contribute to the interpretation of art. Mass art explains everything to the consumer, so he can relax. The culture industries "accustom the senses to the new tempo [...]. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own punishment" (138).

**4) The audience must laugh and be content with laughter.**

Fun is the only pleasure, the audience is denied of all desires. Desires are reduced to about adjusting your feelings to what you are meant to feel.

**5) Identity disappears**

The cultural industry is always about the common middle-class man or woman: a type. Any person is interchangeable. Chance becomes law. Identity was always a deception, and "mass culture discloses the fictitious character of the 'individual' in the bourgeois era" (155).

**6) Liquidation of tragedy**

Modern society provides for those it provides for—not everyone. To console the masses, tragedies appear to add depth. "Tragedy is reduced to the threat to destroy anyone who does not cooperate, whereas its paradoxical significance once lay in a hopeless resistance to mythic destiny. (152).

**7) Art loses autonomy**

Art is now only commercial, useful, and cheap. Use value has become exchange value. "The commodity function of art disappears only to be wholly realized when art becomes a species of commodity instead, marketable and interchangeable like an industrial product" (158). But making art cheap does not make it available: "The abolition of educational privilege by the device of clearance sales does not open for the masses the spheres from which they were formerly excluded, but, given existing social conditions, contributes directly to the decay of education and the progress of barbaric meaninglessness." (160)

**8) Art and language are reduced to advertising**

"Culture is a paradoxical commodity. So completely is it subject to the law of exchange that it is no longer exchanged; it is so blindly consumed in use that it can no longer be used" (161). "Advertising today is a negative principle, a blocking device [...]. [T]he object is to overpower the customer, who is conceived as absent-minded or resistant." (162–63).

**Dialectic, n**

[...] **2.** In modern Philosophy: Specifically applied by **Kant** to the criticism which shows the **mutually contradictory** character of the principles of science, when they are employed to determine objects beyond the limits of experience (i.e. the soul, the world, God);

by **Hegel** (who denies that such contradictions are ultimately irreconcilable) the term is applied (*a*) to the process of thought by which such **contradictions are seen to merge themselves in a higher truth** that comprehends them; and (*b*) to the world-process, which, being in his view but the thought-process on its objective side, develops similarly by a continuous unification of opposites.

(*Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. London: Oxford U P ,1989)

Thesis || Antithesis → Synthesis

**Bourgeois, n**

**1.** *orig.* A (French) citizen or freeman of a city or burgh, as distinguished from a peasant on the one hand, and a gentleman on the other; *now* often taken as the type of the mercantile or shopkeeping middle class of any country. Also fem. bourgeoisie, a Frenchwoman of the middle class.

**2.** Used disparagingly. **a.** In communist or socialist writings: a capitalist; anyone judged to be an exploiter of the proletariat. **b.** A socially or aesthetically conventional person; = PHILISTINE n. 4. Hence to shock the bourgeois [F. épater le(s) bourgeois], to behave unconventionally, to utter novel opinions; so bourgeois-shocker. Cf. ÉPATER.

(*Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. London: Oxford U P ,1989)

Private Realm

Sphere of Public Authority

Civil Society	Public sphere in the political realm	State
Conjugal family's internal space	Public sphere in the world of letters "Town"	Court

Schematic drawing of the bourgeois society from Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Trans. of *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1962; London: Polity, 1989), 30.