



Notes to Literature

Weekly Reading Booklet

#12 : Adorno and
Horkheimer's
*"The Culture
Industry as Mass
Deception"* (1944)

NL

NOTES TO LITERATURE

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Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Continuum, 1999.

Rose, Gillian. *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*. Verso Press, 2014.

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11 Adorno & Horkheimer

From *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (1944)

The sociological view that the loss of support from objective religion and the disintegration of the last pre-capitalist residues, in conjunction with technical and social differentiation and specialization, have given rise to cultural chaos is refuted by daily experience. Culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together. Even the aesthetic manifestations of political opposites proclaim the same inflexible rhythm. The decorative administrative and exhibition buildings of industry differ little between authoritarian and other countries. The bright monumental structures shooting up on all sides show off the systematic ingenuity of international concerns, toward which the unfettered entrepreneurial system, whose monuments are the dismal residential and commercial blocks in the surrounding areas of desolate cities, was already swiftly advancing. The older buildings around the concrete centers already look like slums, and the new bungalows on the outskirts, like the flimsy structures at international trade fairs, sing the praises of technical progress while inviting their users to throw them away after short use like tin cans. But the town-planning projects, which are supposed to perpetuate individuals as autonomous units in hygienic small apartments, subjugate them only more completely to their adversary, the total power of capital.* Just as the occupants

of city centers are uniformly summoned there for purposes of work and leisure, as producers and consumers, so the living cells crystallize into homogenous, well-organized complexes. The conspicuous unity of macrocosm and microcosm confronts human beings with a model of their culture: the false identity of universal and particular. All mass culture under monopoly is identical, and the contours of its skeleton, the conceptual armature fabricated by monopoly, are beginning to stand out. Those in charge no longer take much trouble to conceal the structure, the power of which increases the more bluntly its existence is admitted. Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the crash they intentionally produce. They call themselves industries, and the published figures for their directors' incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products.

Interested parties like to explain the culture industry in technological terms. Its millions of participants, they argue, demand reproduction processes which inevitably lead to the use of standard products to meet the same needs at countless locations. The technical antithesis between few production centers and widely dispersed reception necessitates organization and planning by those in control. The standardized forms, it is claimed, were originally derived from the needs of the consumers: that is why they are accepted with so little resistance. In reality, a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need is unifying the system ever more tightly. What is not mentioned is that the basis on which technology is gaining power over society is the power of those whose economic position in society is strongest.* Technical rationality today is the rationality of domination. It is the compulsive character of a society alienated from itself. Automobiles, bombs, and films hold the totality together until their levelling element demonstrates its power against the very system of injustice it served. For the present the technology of the culture industry confines itself to standardization and mass production and sacrifices what once distinguished the logic of work from that of society. These adverse effects, however, should not be attributed to the internal laws of technology itself but to its function within the economy today.* Any need which might escape the central control is repressed by that of individual consciousness. The step from telephone to radio has clearly distinguished the roles. The former liberally permitted the participant to play the role of subject. The latter democratically makes

everyone equally into listeners, in order to expose them in authoritarian fashion to the same programs put out by different stations. No mechanism of reply has been developed, and private transmissions are condemned to unfreedom. They confine themselves to the apocryphal sphere of "amateurs," who, in any case, are organized from above. Any trace of spontaneity in the audience of the official radio is steered and absorbed into a selection of specializations by talent-spotters, performance competitions, and sponsored events of every kind. The talents belong to the operation long before they are put on show; otherwise they would not conform so eagerly. The mentality of the public, which allegedly and actually favors the system of the culture industry, is a part of the system, not an excuse for it. If a branch of art follows the same recipe as one far removed from it in terms of its medium and subject matter; if the dramatic denouement in radio "soap operas"* is used as an instructive example of how to solve technical difficulties at both ends of the scale of musical experience – which are mastered no less in "jam sessions" than at the highest levels of jazz – or if a movement from Beethoven is loosely "adapted" in the same way as a Tolstoy novel is adapted for film, the pretext of meeting the public's spontaneous wishes is mere hot air. An explanation in terms of the specific interests of the technical apparatus and its personnel would be closer to the truth, provided that apparatus were understood, down to its last cog, as a part of the economic mechanism of selection.* Added to this is the agreement, or at least the common determination, of the executive powers to produce or let pass nothing which does not conform to their tables, to their concept of the consumer, or, above all, to themselves.

If the objective social tendency of this age is incarnated in the obscure subjective intentions of board chairmen, this is primarily the case in the most powerful sectors of industry: steel, petroleum, electricity, chemicals. Compared to them the culture monopolies are weak and dependent. They have to keep in with the true wielders of power, to ensure that their sphere of mass society, the specific product of which still has too much of cozy liberalism and Jewish intellectualism about it, is not subjected to a series of purges.* The dependence of the most powerful broadcasting company on the electrical industry, or of film on the banks, characterizes the whole sphere, the individual sectors of which are themselves economically intertwined. Everything is so tightly clustered that the concentration of intellect reaches a level where it

overflows the demarcations between company names and technical sectors. The relentless unity of the culture industry bears witness to the emergent unity of politics. Sharp distinctions like those between A and B films, or between short stories published in magazines in different price segments, do not so much reflect real differences as assist in the classification, organization, and identification of consumers. Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated. The public is catered for with a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality, thus advancing the rule of complete quantification. Everyone is supposed to behave spontaneously according to a "level" determined by indices and to select the category of mass product manufactured for their type. On the charts of research organizations, indistinguishable from those of political propaganda, consumers are divided up as statistical material into red, green, and blue areas according to income group.

The schematic nature of this procedure is evident from the fact that the mechanically differentiated products are ultimately all the same. That the difference between the models of Chrysler and General Motors is fundamentally illusory is known by any child, who is fascinated by that very difference. The advantages and disadvantages debated by enthusiasts serve only to perpetuate the appearance of competition and choice. It is no different with the offerings of Warner Brothers and Metro Goldwyn Mayer. But the differences, even between the more expensive and cheaper products from the same firm, are shrinking – in cars to the different number of cylinders, engine capacity, and details of the gadgets, and in films to the different number of stars, the expense lavished on technology, labor and costumes, or the use of the latest psychological formulae. The unified standard of value consists in the level of conspicuous production, the amount of investment put on show. The budgeted differences of value in the culture industry have nothing to do with actual differences, with the meaning of the product itself. The technical media, too, are being engulfed by an insatiable uniformity. Television aims at a synthesis of radio and film, delayed only for as long as the interested parties cannot agree. Such a synthesis, with its unlimited possibilities, promises to intensify the impoverishment of the aesthetic material so radically that the identity of all industrial cultural products, still scantily disguised today, will triumph openly tomorrow in a mocking fulfilment of Wagner's dream of the

total art work. The accord between word, image, and music is achieved so much more perfectly than in Tristan because the sensuous elements, which compliantly document only the surface of social reality, are produced in principle within the same technical work process, the unity of which they express as their true content. This work process integrates all the elements of production, from the original concept of the novel, shaped by its side long glance at film,* to the last sound effect. It is the triumph of invested capital. To impress the omnipotence of capital on the hearts of expropriated job candidates as the power of their true master is the purpose of all films, regardless of the plot selected by the production directors.

From Gillian Rose, “The Crisis in Culture” in *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (1978)

The Frankfurt School, 1923-50

All the tensions within the German academic community which accompanied the changes in political, cultural and intellectual life in Germany since 1890 were reproduced in the Institute for Social Research from its inception in Frankfurt in 1923. These changes were widely diagnosed as a ‘crisis in culture’. By this very definition the ‘crisis’ was deplored yet exacerbated. The Institute carried these tensions with it into exile and when it returned to Germany after the war and found itself the sole heir to a discredited tradition the inherited tensions became even more acute. These tensions are evident in the work of most of the School’s members, and most clearly, self-consciously and importantly in the work of Theodor W. Adorno.

From 1890 the German academic community reacted in a variety of ways to the sudden and momentous development of capitalism in Germany, and to the new role of Germany in the world. This resulted in disillusionment with various scientific and philosophical methods, and the pedagogical and philosophical revival which followed occurred across the political spectrum, to the extent that the spectrum was represented in the universities. The different attempts to ‘re-engage learning’ and reinvigorate German life have been indicted for their political naïvety and irresponsibility. Although the Frankfurt School was deliberately set up to be outside the academic community, the aims and work of the Institute amount to a most ambitious attempt to ‘reengage learning’. For, on the one hand, the School tried more concretely than any university department to reunify the fragmented branches of knowledge in the social sciences without sacrificing the fruits of any of them. Neo-Marxist, it was not deterred by academic cries against ‘materialism’ and ‘materialist’ methods. On the other hand, the School faltered in its attempt to redefine Marxism intellectually and politically for its generation. By the early thirties, it had

dropped its orientation towards the workers' movement, a process which was capped by the replacement of Carl Grünberg by Max Horkheimer as director of the Institute, and by the substitution of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (Journal for Social Research) edited by Horkheimer for Grünberg's *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung* (Archive for the History of Socialism and the Workers' Movement). It even dropped its interest in class and increasingly turned its attention to the analysis of culture and authority. Instead of politicising academia, it academised politics. This transposition became the basis for its subsequent achievements. Yet time and time again, the history of the School reveals this tension: as an institution, it reaffirmed and reinforced those aspects of German life which it criticised and aimed to change, just as it reaffirmed and reinforced those aspects of the intellectual universe which it criticised and aimed to change. Only if this is realised can the goals, achievements and failures of the School and of the work of Adorno be defined and assessed.

During the thirties, first in Germany and later in exile, the School is best examined in the same light. Under Horkheimer's directorship, it avoided the pedantry and conservatism of the universities, while engaging in sociological research which united theoretical and empirical inquiry. Many of the themes which recur in the articles and books by members of the School published during this period echo themes raised throughout the German academic world, such as the lamented fragmentation of knowledge, the appeal to an often diffuse notion of 'totality' as the lost perspective, the attack on positivism and the recovering of traditions. All of these emphases and the academic assumption that to 'reengage learning' would be to rescue society from the ravages of capitalism and modernity were epidemic in Germany until 1933. Yet the Frankfurt School, although implicated in this more than its own rhetoric or scholarship to date suggests, deserves different treatment too. The special case of the School has always rested on its particular fusion of the Idealism, which arose in opposition to neo-Kantianism, with the revival of Marxism after the First World War.

It may be said that the members of the School were addressing themselves in their collaboration during the upheavals of the thirties to the question which Marx asked at the end of the 1844 Manuscripts, 'How do we now stand in relation to the Hegelian dialectic?'. They asked this question for their

generation, which was the generation younger than Lukács', disappointed with the working class since 1919, but, unlike him, increasingly disillusioned with the development of communism in Russia during the twenties. Like Lukács, the School considered that to be consistent with Marx, it was necessary to take account of flourishing non-dialectical philosophies and sociologies, just as Marx had scanned the philosophy and political economy which flourished in his day. On the one hand, the School was dismayed that the social sciences had developed so separately from each other and sought to combat this fragmentation. On the other hand, Horkheimer did not believe that one man alone could undertake research in all the relevant fields. The members of the School tended to specialise while, at the same time, breaking down the established barriers between philosophy and sociology in their particular areas. Horkheimer was particularly concerned to take advantage of the developments in empirical research techniques which in Germany had occurred quite apart from developments in theoretical sociology and at a time when almost every German professor of sociology considered it incumbent on him to produce a theoretical sociology.

By combining several empirical methods in any inquiry, he believed that the evils of too restricted an empiricism could be avoided. This unity underlying the work of the members of the School is evident in the various publications of the thirties, in the *Zeitschrift* and most clearly in joint works such as *Autorität und Familie* (Authority and the Family). However, from the outset, the inheritance of non-Marxist critical traditions affected the style and presentation of many of the contributors. This inheritance from non-Marxist criticisms of Hegel's system, for example, those of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, tolerates idiosyncrasy and hence makes for another kind of fragmentation. It is this inheritance from a tradition which has itself never been widely understood even within Germany which, paradoxically, has often increased the School's appeal, while at the same time, exposing it to misinterpretation. But it has prevented the work of the School from having a more cogent and continual impact on sociology.

Many of these non-Marxist influences, Hegelian and post-Hegelian, were present in Lukács' writings too, especially up to 1923. The School rejected many of Lukács' assumptions and theories, particularly the idea of the working class as the subject/object of history and the notion of 'imputed' class consciousness.

However, a subject/object dichotomy was retained, and ideas from the non-Marxist critical traditions developed in a way which affected the style of the work of many members of the School. Many of Lukács' central concepts were thus retained, such as 'subject', 'object', 'fetishism' and 'reification', but they attained a quite different status. The School sought to define Marxism as a mode of cognition *sui generis* on the assumption that there is no longer any privileged carrier of that cognition, any universal class. The influence of Lukács on the School has been both underestimated and overestimated, and nowhere have the continuities and discontinuities been adequately traced.

Further Reading Suggestions

- * Althusser, L. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation” in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (Monthly Review 2001)
- * W.E.B. DuBois. "Marxism and the Negro Problem." *The Crisis* 40:5 (May 1933).
- * Foucault, M. and Deleuze, G. “Intellectuals and Power.” In Michel Foucault, Language. Counter-Memory. Practice (Cornell 1977) 205-217.
- * Foucault, M. *History of Sexuality. Vol 1: An Introduction* (Vintage 1990) 92-102.
- * Horkheimer. “Traditional and Critical Theory.” *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (Continuum 1975)
- * Marx, K. “Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” In *The Marx-Engels Reader* (Norton & Co. 1978)

You can find a full list of suggestions for further reading and secondary literature on all of the primary texts in these booklets on the website:

<https://www.notestoliterature.com/twelve-books-to-have>

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If you would like more information about Notes to Literature, please do get in touch with me at jonathan@notestoliterature.com or visit the website: notestoliterature.com.

If you are a school, or a company, and would like to inquire about arranging courses for your students or employees, please reach out. I can provide further details on the different kinds of approaches and services I offer depending on the particular learning contexts.

If you would like to pursue further independent reading on any of the authors in the booklet, or if you are setting up a reading group, I'm always happy to send on reading lists and guided reading questions that might be helpful for your discussions.

And of course, if you are interested in taking a course with Notes, I'd be delighted to hear from you. I offer free no-obligation meetings to discuss your goals, talk about some aspects of my approach, and think about how the courses could be tailored for you.

Happy reading.



About Me : Jonathan Gallagher

I received my doctorate in 2019 from the University of Edinburgh, where I taught several undergraduate courses, ranging from medieval and early modern literature, to Romantic, Modernist and Late-Modernist poetry and drama. My doctoral research examined the relationship between processes of state-formation in early modern England and the spectacular flourishing of religious poetry witnessed during the same period. This work has been published by leading academic journals in my field, and tries to show that religious poetry was vitally and critically responsive to broad changes in social relations and practices of rule in 17C England.

In my teaching, as in my research, I'm drawn to examining intellectual history and literary art in the context of given social and political conditions. With that in mind, in 2022, I founded Notes to Literature. My hope is that Notes will grow into a distinguished provider of personalised adult education in the humanities. The plan is to go about this one client at a time.

You can learn more about Notes and me here: <https://www.notestoliterature.com/my-work>

<https://edinburgh.academia.edu/JonathanGallagher>